

**Address to the E.H. Johnson Award Luncheon**  
**Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, Founder, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**  
**Recipient of the 2008 E.H. Johnson Award**  
**Tuesday, June 3, 2008**  
**Ottawa, Ontario**

**By whose Authority: An African Woman's Initiative**

Receiving this honour with me are many many women and men. Let me name three of the women, my paternal grandmother, Aba Awotwiwa, my mother, Yaa Dakwaa, and my mother-in-law, Eunice Oduyoye—women who faced life with courage and compassion. Among the men, my father, Kwaw Yamoah, my professor, Noel King and my spouse, men who trusted that I could speak for myself and, acquit myself well, in contexts that discount women's word.

With me also are Daisy Obi and Isabel Johnson women who risked standing with me when I made the move to call together African Women theologians in 1980 at Ibadan, Nigeria. For this meeting, a prominent Anglican Bishop and a renowned African theology Professor and Methodist Minister, could not believe that African women theologians were a reality of course their understanding of who is a theologian was different from mine. The latter did honour our invitation to "come and see", gave us an inspiring address and an imagery to work with. He said to us "A bird with one wing does not fly" African theology can only begin to fly when this women's wing is fully grown. We took the challenge. The bishop's wife honoured our invitation and so did all the church women's groups that we invited. They assured us of support. The roots of what flowers to-day in this E.H. Johnson award is accountability to both the church and the academy. I carried that experience in my heart and looked for other women. I could not travel alone.

**Building community**

The next stage, preparing for a convocation in Accra 1989 had a team of women including Brigalia Bam, Musimbi Kanyoro, Rosemary Edet, Bernadette Mbuy Beya Grace Eneme, Rose Zoe Obianga..., Bette Ekeya, Teresa Okure, and Elizabeth Amoah and myself. We stayed with the Accra vision and arrived in Nairobi after 7 years. There, we reaffirmed our Accra decision to stay together as a Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and elected Musimbi as the first General Co-ordinator. The Circle story has been written up in many places. This is not the place for the history. It is the place to say thank you to all the women who confirmed my assertion that Africa does have women theologians, women of faith, living and proclaiming their faith in the living God in whose image both women and men are made. Among us was one Muslim women Dr. Rabiatu Ammah. Today the Circle is a multi faith community as most of Africa is. So enough of the history.

This is the place to say thank you to all, men and women, who stood by us and supported us with words and deeds and cheques. The project which won us German church money to continue the Circle from 1996 was written by me in Toronto while I was teaching at Immanuel College. Lately the international ministries of Presbyterian Church in Canada has enabled the Circle's work. Several church women's organizations made our meetings and publications possible. We faced many challenges but we pressed on and became known beyond our continent. A few years later I was here to join in inaugurating Ecumenical Networks of Women of African Heritage (ENOWAH). As a Circle it took us a long time to open up for theological collaboration and dialogue but as individuals we belonged to several

Ecumenical, Church and NGO coalitions as well as to our church women's groups and academic associations.

### **Our Profile**

When we were planning the 1989 meeting, we were clear that we wanted to research write and to publish. Africa had/has strong, colourful and effective church women's groups that link them with others in their Christian World Communions. NGOs were beginning to spring up to tackle the economic development and human rights challenges of African women. The need we felt was to underline the crucial role played by culture and religion in African women's lives. We had identified these two as factors shaping women's self-understanding and under-girding the dualistic construct that often works to the detriment of women. We needed a cure for the negative effects of culture and religion and a way to appropriate their empowering and affirming aspects.

Experience had taught us that we had to take our lives into our own hands, jostle the crowds and touch the healing hem. Scouting around for the 1980 meeting, I had been given a contact for a religious sister studying at Fordham. I wrote to her, she was enthusiastic about the project but to close her letter back to me she asked. "Who is authorizing you to call this meeting?" I was stunned, I had never thought of that—"by whose authority?" The need to affirm our humanity and to contribute to African theology was the driving force. The Circle has continued to be moved by hope and faith. Like the mustard seed of the parable we continue to grow and we hope to be a shade in the scorching sun and nourishment in an Africa whose abundant resources do not feed its people.

### **Scope of Research**

Over the almost two decades of being together we have been guided by several themes and concerns. Our 1989 convocation was convened under the banner "Daughters of Africa Arise" with a keynote address, Bible Study on the raising of the Daughter of Jarius and a sermon on the woman brought before Jesus. Other Bible Studies at the convocation were the Samaritan Woman, cultural studies included women in the church, human sexuality and women's place in creation. After the convocation we transformed ourselves into a "Study Institute" and discussed several of the papers the women had brought. (Every woman for whom transportation was paid had to contribute a paper). We ran the "paper-reading session of 6 days as a study Institute We aired several cultural issues and dispersed to our homes to see who else would like to join the Circle. Several national sectors were inaugurated and undertook research into cultural and religious issues.

This first meeting of our Institute surveyed African Women's context in general highlighting several cultural factors. We deliberated on issues such as single mothers, polygamy, culture's fences, women's role in the church, Jesus Christ and the liberation of African women. There were several creative offerings in the form of poems and prayers and drama. We have documented this beginning in *Talitha, Qumi: Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* 1989, Daystar Press Ibadan 1990. Papers from the ensuing Institute were published by Orbis Books in *The Will to Arise* in 1992.

Searching for a publisher for this manuscript revealed to us that we were not doing what African women were expected to do. One publisher rejected the manuscript because the issues were elitist. African women concerned with marriage, parenting, participation in religion, cultural practices were not expected to study the issues in order to seek transformation. Another said they expected development

concerns like income generation and co-operatives for mutual support. We said we were with all of that, but believed that if the intellectual work to unearth the root causes is left undone or left to disinterested academics our lives will coast along and coping devices will be the only evidence of African women's creativity. Un-reflected living is not the lot of human beings. Orbis came to the rescue and we have not looked back. To-date we have over 100 books including communal anthologies and individual works. We have continued with several aspects of our daily lives in hands-on undertakings as members of other groups. We have worked in the area of violence against women, HIV and AIDS and now on trafficking of persons. All these have cultural and religious ramifications, and we do the research that substantiates these assertions.

Until 2002 I could say I knew what the Circle was about and what the women in it were doing. Things may have changed but up until then their membership in the Circle depended on interest in research and writing. We encouraged women with those interests to then form Circles of like-minded women so they do not walk the road of research alone and as individuals. The ideal of life-in-community which is an African heritage is what we were trying to promote. It is difficult therefore for me to claim for the Circle what its members have done for themselves. I know how effective several have been in initiating new moves, mentoring other women and producing theological literature. How this literature has impacted others will be difficult to tell. But early this year a medical doctor working on HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia was telling me how helpful Circle books on the subject have been to him in this work. I hear such testimonies about our publications from many quarters. How they have impacted African women or changed lives will be difficult for me to tell. I can only try to tell what a couple of the women have done which I think may have come directly from being Circle members.

### Mutural Mentoring

Eva Chipenda a participant in the Accra meeting was inspired to write her life story into a book which has been published by the World Council Churches. Talking about this book to me Eva said after Accra I said to myself Mercy can write so can I. After Nairobi 1996 one of the study commissions was charged with writing the story of women who had imparted their communities. The book which came out of it was titled Herstories. The editors wanted to include my mother's story so I got two of her granddaughters Joyce Boham and Nana Adwoa Asiam to interview her and to write her story. You will find their effort in this book, editor Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar. The point of this story is, in the circle we encourage one another to put on paper the many ideas that they bring out when they are in their discussion groups. We wanted to make the point that women can contribute to literary heritage of Africa.

**Bernadette Mbuy Beya:** A Roman Catholic sister who was part of the team of ten that planned the 1989 event. She had the task of producing a paper on sexuality and spirituality. This led to her work among women sex-workers in Lubumbashi. She organized them, advocated for them with state authorities for compassionate legislation, got some "off the streets" into other income generating ventures and established an orphanage, the foundation of which was her task of minding the children of the ladies on the streets.

**Musimbi Kanyoro:** A Lutheran, she was the director of the Lutheran World Federation's women work at the time of the planning of the 1989 event. She was also one of the ten. She became the first General Co-ordinator of the Circle in 1996. Musimbi later became the General Secretary of the World YWCA, where she put an emphasis on theology and worked on the Association's concerns from a theological perspective. Her concentration on HIV/AIDS impacted not only the Circle but the

YWCA. Both organizations are still grappling with the issue. With her as co-ordinator Yale Divinity School began an initiative on HIV/AIDS which collaborates with the Circle and is putting out literature on HIV/AIDS in African which I am sure is helping those who are in that front. Musimbi herself has moved on is now at a Strategic position I a big organization in the US. She would be the best person to tell you what the Circle has meant in her life.

**Isabel Phiri** is a Malawian who succeeded Musimbi in 2002 as General Co-ordinator, was inspired by her membership of the Circle to do her Ph.D. She wrote on women in the Presbyterian Church in Malawi at a time when the debate on the ordination of women was raging in that church. Together with two women from the sociology Department in the University of Malawi where she was teaching, she did a study on sexual harassment on the campus. The furor this caused was the reason for her leaving the country. In South Africa at the University of Pietermaritzburg she has been instrumental in setting up a religion and gender course that is drawing in many graduate students, both men and women. She is but one of several Circle women who are influencing the curricula at the Institutions where they teach.

**Institute of Women in Religion and Culture:** The Circle in Ghana initiated this work at Trinity Theological Seminary. On the research and publication line, the key persons were Dr. Elizabeth Amoah, the Rev. Dr. Laurene Nyarko, the Rev. Diana Abbey Mensah and myself. Dana is the one whose personal effort has created a Circle around her in her part of Ghana and is working with several women on the challenges of the Trokosi (ritual slavery of women). She does have real stories of girls/women who have been redeemed from the shrines and settled into vocations. The work of the Institute I am sure is changing the views on gender not only among the women and men who come to the programmes but also those who read our books. Working together in the Circle convinced us that local transformation-oriented efforts need to be undertaken if gender-sensitivity is to become a way of life in religion and culture in Africa. It was to fill this need, that the Institute of Women Religion and Culture has been established at Trinity Theological Seminary (TTS).

The Institute serves the needs of Africa in the critical area of the role of religion and culture in peace and development and in human relations. Trinity theological seminary is an inter-denominational institution. Through contacts cultivated with churches, ecumenical and other religious bodies and NGO's, the project has begun to have a wide impact on women of faith in Ghana and where ever the Circle is active. The evidence for this is the number of calls I get asking "when is the next meeting?" And the invitation to speak to a wide spectrum of academic ecclesial and humanitarian groups.

The project supports marginal voices seeking to be heard and to become part of Africa's journey towards viability. We are contributing to challenging cultural and religious practices that are harmful and to promoting their enduring humanizing elements. The project has become a centre for human development especially for women.

A concrete impact of this work is the One-In-a-Million. Women fund-raising project (Naming our Mothers and Women in Mission). Women not only in Ghana and Africa but worldwide have caught this vision and are helping raise funds to build Talitha Qumi Centre at Trinity Theological Seminary. This conference facility is a visible evidence of the presence of our concern for gender sensitivity and gender justices as the seminary. This centre will be a home for women of faith including Muslim women who see themselves as sisters of faith at TQC. These are all women seeking transformation and empowerment. We hope it will continue to influence men too and especially faith communities and their institutions.

### **Current Concerns**

We have entered a phase of collaboration. We worked with YWCA Ethiopia to organize our Pan-African conference on HIV and AIDS in 2002. In connection with this, deliberations began in Yale Divinity School (YDS). An initiative to collaborate with the Circle on AIDS was launched. Circle members were invited to a conference at Yale which discussed the form of collaboration. The result is a continuing research support by YDS that Circle members enjoy.

One of the objectives of the Circle was to get women's studies in Religion to tertiary institutions. Individual members who teach have taken the opportunity to integrate women into their course offerings.

Times change, interests change and new forms of making the Circle relevant to the needs of women, faith communities and the academy evolve. Our research and publishing continue and we struggle to get the books on to book lists of the academies, while serving as a pool of resource persons to many women's groups, as well as others who look for conversation partners on the issues we are raising.

### **Continuing Challenges**

The challenges are many. Not least being our need for face to face encounter for hearing one another. Africa does not have the level of infrastructure and resources that allow teleconferences to function efficiently. We have managed to get one book out through email editing but we missed the satisfaction of hearing one another out. We have also a couple of books especially from Kenya that came out because the authors contributed to pay for publishing. Conference and publication costs are the main challenges. We have begun to source funds for research but this has now become a specialist arena. It also has its limitations as those who have the funds also have their own agenda and so would direct us to issues that have priority for them. If they coincide with our needs then all is well otherwise one has to make a difficult choice.

Inclusiveness remains a challenge especially on the issues of language. Communication across the languages becomes a source of division if it is not managed judiciously. It has its most adverse effect in publication. Translation does not come cheap. The attempt to do the newsletter in both English and French could only succeed because the French-speaking co-ordinator Helene Yinda volunteered to do it herself. This means that most of our publications are in English. We have not succeeded in bringing out one piece in Portuguese and keeping the Lusophone sector integrated has become a major challenge.

All our tasks are handled by volunteers as we do not have the financial base to become "employers". We are struggling to craft a constitution but even that remains in the pipe line. We have functioned all these twenty years under the umbrella of one institution or the other depending on who the General Co-ordinator is. The situation does not hamper the work but it is making it difficult for others to understand us.

### **The Future**

We began in faith, and faith has carried us thus far. For as long as women remain a majority that is discriminated against and religion remains a key factor in human life, women in theology will find themselves having to ensure that wisdom is not perceived as being in the nature of men only. Women's

wisdom has to be part of what moves our community of women and men—both in the church and in society.

I worked with WCC and AACC and lived in Nigeria during the relief, rehabilitation and development period of the post-Civil war years. The churches involved in these efforts included Canadian churches and prominently E.H Johnson whose memory makes it possible for me to be here today. The global community of Christians suffered with Nigeria, as they do with Sudan, Kenya, Zimbabwe and others. Today you have demonstrated once again what it means to be the global family of Christ. Some of our initiatives as Christians may not sit well with people with other interests. What we began in the Circle scandalized some and raised eye brows.

As Teresa had asked at the initial stage, so have several others, “By whose authority do you do these things? That used to be a normal question, a woman had no authority of her own. An African woman, all women under the ancient honour culture had to be “allowed” or “permitted” before they could act. A woman with initiative risks being labeled a witch. The women who came together as a Circle claimed the right to respond to the promptings of the image of God in us. We had to respond to the love of God who had graciously endowed us with talents. We had to honour the giver by utilizing them, we had to speak as silence was no longer an option, the whole world saw what was happening to us. All accounts of disasters ended with “and the women and the children are the worst hit.” Why should the situation continue? African women will feature prominently among what Paul Collier calls “The Bottom Billion” — the world’s discarded or ignored people. The people we do not count, and do not count upon to make a positive difference, are a loss to what God expects us to make of creation and community.

In Africa the issue of poverty is often anchored on economic on economic challenges. Yes, but beneath and undergirding the economic factor is what the late Fr. Mveng of Cameroon named anthropological poverty. It is the very humanity of the African woman which is at stake and liberation of minds and spirits has to be a priority item on the agenda of all who would seek the good of Africa and especially of its women and children. Gender has to remain a priority on the agenda of all who seek justice and the humanization of every man women and child, till all feel, behave and act as children of God, and a beings created in the image of God.

It is a slow and arduous task.

It does not lend itself to easy evaluation.

It is like getting one bent over woman to stand straight, a role model for other bent over persons.

It is like holding the hand of one child presumed dead and saying stand up.

It is like an experience of resurrection here and now.

It is God at work.

It is the grace our Lord bathing us.

It is the holy spirit at work in us to bring us to our true being as the children of God, and all we can say is thanks be to God for authorizing us to seek justices.

Once again thank you for counting us worthy of this Award, it will encourage the sisters in the Circle and tell our collaborators that they are backing a good course for the sake of humanity and for the world that God so loves.

June 3rd 2008, Canada

Mercy Amba Oduyoye