



3 | THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE INSTITUTE OF WOMEN IN RELIGION AND CULTURE AT THE TALITHA QUMI CENTRE, LEGON GHANA FROM 1999 TO 2022

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Abstract

The July 1986 Nairobi conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians commissioned four groups to examine the patriarchal structures that determined African women's lives in their religious, cultural, economic and social settings. The Religion and Culture Commission, which was the fourth commission, translated into the 'Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (IWRC)' in 1999 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon Ghana. The IWRC set out as its agenda to organize public education on gender sensitivity and gender justice in religion and culture as it affects women's daily lives in Ghana. The public education targeted women, faith-based organization and traditional leaders seeking a biblical, Qur'anic and cultural hermeneutics that recognize and promote the humanity of women. The liberative theology that emanated from this approach sought to transform women's lives in their families, churches, academic and social settings. This chapter aims at highlighting the developments of the Institute from its inception in 1999 to 2022. It explores the developments of the Institute, achievements and challenges to see how the Institute has been relevant to their well-being in the areas of religion and culture.

Keywords: Institute of Women in Religion and Culture; Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Talitha Qumi Centre; African Women's theology

Introduction

This paper highlights the achievements of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at the Talitha Qumi Centre, Legon Ghana in terms of creating space for liberative theological thinking and conversations about women from 1996 to 2022. It traces the activities of the Religion and Cul-

ture Commission of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) at the Talitha Qumi Centre at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon in Ghana which translated into the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (hereafter be referred to as the Institute 'and how the programs of the Institute run vis-à-vis the administrative work of the Circle. The aim is to highlight the contributions of the Institute for Ghanaian women and the way forward. To so doing, it narrates the history of the Institute and how the administration of the Circle was organized through the Institute at the Talitha Qumi Centre. The approach is a descriptive historical sketch from a participant-observer perspective.

Women building their own world

The contextual setting of the mid 1990s motivated the establishment of the Institute. The period experienced a rise in the struggle for equity and development for women and for the recognition of women's innate and intellectual abilities rather than their biological worth. This was precipitated by the United Nation's Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in September 1995, asking for equity, development, and peace for all women. The struggle for the recognition and inclusion of women at tables for decision making in faith-based organizations, political spaces, educational institutions, and cultural settings had also picked up among African women. These issues presented, came up in church and other religious institutions and their affiliated branches. The church for some time had struggled with the debate on women's ordination, women's participation in liturgy, the recognition of women through liturgical language, women's place in the administration of the church and other activities as were undertaken by the church. Religion and culture permeate African women's lives in many ways presenting themselves in many forms that not only give hope but also hinders the growth of women.

The challenges presented by religion and culture for women formed the basis of the establishment of the Institute. Thus, creating spaces for women that has been part of the Liberation theology movement to transform women's lives in their families, churches, academic and social settings is very significant. Jutta, asserted that women's leadership in the political and social arena was also beginning to pick up and needed advocacy

from women's movements to increase the pace (Juta, 2014:254). In all, the struggle to examine the patriarchal nature of structures against women is still ongoing. Harmful cultural practices such as marriage of minors, inhumane widowhood rights, elderly women tagged as witches, women and girls trafficking, '*trokosi*'¹ (the slavery of girls), discrimination against women, verbal, physical, and psychological violence against women were but a few of the norms that characterized African communities and are still not over.

The Birth of the Institute

The women's concerns and challenges over the years had been no respecter of culture, religion, nor educational background. The solidarity built on the commonality of struggles became the basis for the sisterhood that held women together to forge ahead. It is that sisterhood that motivated Prof. Constance Buchanan to fight in Harvard Divinity School to allow Third World women Theologians (as they were called then) including Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (nee Yamoah) to join a team of international scholars to lecture their Women in Religion Class of in 1983. That singular act gave birth to many programs. among others a formal organ whose focus would be to encourage, empower and mentor African women Theologians, to research, write and publish their own theologies, a theology that stresses the need to imitate Jesus' status quo of humanity. This was the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

After the creation of the Circle in 1989, African women started to made various strides to establish themselves in the fight for empowerment. The 1996 Nairobi conference saw the need to create commissions that were to focus on various aspect of the Circle's work. For this purpose, some commissions were instituted: the Commission for the Ordained Women, Commission on Biblical Studies, and the Commission on Reli-

¹ A traditional system in the Eastern part of Ghana specifically in Adidome in the Volta Region. In this systems, young girls (usually virgins) are sent to live in the shrine of a fetish priest to atone for the sins committed by a male member of her family. These girls live and have children for the fetish priest which automatically renders them outcast in their community.

gion and Culture which was led by Drs. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah and Sr. Anne Nasimiyu Wasike. Dr. Mercy Oduyoye was at the time working with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, while Prof. Elizabeth Amoah worked at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Ghana, Legon with Dr. Nasimiyu employed by the Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya as a lecturer with the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. These women theologians decided to create an Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture and set out to look for funding.

The initial startup grant, which was to run for a five-year period, was given by the Ford Foundation in America to help fund the Institute. One of the conditions for the grant was for the Institute to be attached to an existing educational or religious institution and to focus on women. At that time, Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye had returned home on retirement from her position at the World Council of Churches as the Deputy General Secretary and joined hands with Prof. Elizabeth Amoah and Prof. Rabbiatu Ammah who were then lecturers at the University of Ghana, and Rev. Laurene Nyarko the late Rev. Rachael Etrue Tetteh, an ordained Minister with the Methodist Church Ghana, and Rev. Dinah Abbey-Mensah of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana. Hence, as a founder of the Circle and the leader of the Commission on Religion and Culture, Mercy Oduyoye led her colleagues to begin a public education Centre to educate all women including those at the grassroots of society while championing the concerns of The Circle to promote research and publication. The project was therefore named the “Institute of Women in Religion and Culture”.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, a body that had just brought together women theologians in Africa to write and publish women’s voices and their experiences of religion and culture had just begun its work. The founder, Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye working then as the lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan had searched and brought together sixty-nine (69) women from all over the African Continent encouraging them to publish and write while encouraging others to go into theological education with the aim of increasing women’s participation and voices in the theological space. However, the issues written and published by the women theologians

only stayed as literature available for only those who could and cared to read them. This left out the stories and experiences of a huge number of women in the church, market, farms, homes, schools, villages, and various communities on the continent.

Per the requirement of Ford Foundation, Mercy's love for ecumenism, and her personal attachment to her father who had worked as a tutor at Trinity College in Kumasi, (now Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana after it was relocated to Accra) in the late 40s and early 50s. The Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon being an ecumenical theological institution that trains ministers for the five sponsoring churches (The Methodist Church Ghana, Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana, AME Zion Church, and Anglican Diocese of Accra), became a fertile ground to plant the Institute.

The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (IWRC) was thus inaugurated at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon on the 13th of March 1999 with a passion to empower African women for the third millennium. The Institute rested on the shoulders of volunteers working with a board. The Advisory Board to whom the Director reported the day-to-day management of the Institute was chaired by Rev. Dr. AA Akrong from the Department of African Studies of the University of Ghana. The members were:

Rev. Dr. AA Akrong –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

Rev. Dr. Dan Antwi – President of the Seminary

Dr. Rabiatsu Ammah –

University of Ghana/Department for the Study of Religions

Dr. Elizabeth Amoah –

University of Ghana/Department for the Study of Religions

Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro – World Young Women's Christian Association

Rev. Lorene Nyarko – Methodist Church Ghana

Rev. Dinah Abbey Mensah – Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana

Ms. Esther Ofei-Aboagye –

Director of the Social Welfare Department Ghana

Dr. Irene Odotei –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

Prof. Sam Addo –

University of Cape Coast/Department of African Studies

Rev Prof. Emmanuel A. Obeng –

University of Cape Coast/Department of African Studies

Mr. Kwasi Sam-Woode – Director Samwoode Publications

Fr. Paul Bekye –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

Rev. Lily Oteng-Yeboah – Presbyterian Church of Ghana

Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Asante –

Vice President of the Trinity Theological Seminary

Mr. J.A. Addy – Finance Officer of the Seminary

Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye – Director of the Institute

Mrs. *Joyce Boham* and Mrs. *Lily Joy* were the only stipend members of staff at the Institute who were helped by various temporary staff volunteers.

The inaugural gathering was attended by the clergy, faculty members from various tertiary institutions, seminarians, students in religious studies, Muslim women groups, Christian women groups, and Queen Mothers. From a one-room for students' residence turned into an office at the Women's Hall, now Megill-Baeta-Jiage Hall, the Institute started its work emphasizing on the need for gender sensitivity and gender justice in the Ghanaian Community with a hope to encourage a change in the people's attitudes towards women.

The Institute also worked closely with the Circle. At that time, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro had been elected as the first General Coordinator of The Circle during the Nairobi 1996 conference. Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, the Founder and mother to The Circle and the First Director of the Institute together with Prof. Elizabeth Amoah introduced Joyce Boham to work as the Personal Assistant to Prof. Kanyoro and the Liaison officer for the Circle while working at the same time for the Institute as administrative assistant to Mercy Oduyoye. Between 1996 and 2001, all local Circle conferences and Pan African Conferences were planned and implemented

through the Institute. This arrangement was necessitated by the fact that Dr. Kanyoro was based in Geneva working with the World YWCA.

The uniqueness of the work of the Institute as a multi-faith centre gained recognition from many in the academic settings throughout the world, drawing students and faculty from far and wide to participate in the movement. The Institute focused on intensifying the struggle against fundamentalist and anti-women uses of the Bible, encouraging the re-reading of the Bible while recognizing its cultural biases. It also focused on emphasising the need for theological education and ministerial formation for women, pushing for cross gender discussions, and seeking the recognition of African women's theologies to be at the heart of global women's theologies among others. The Institute became the resource centre for students, lecturers, and theologians who were interested in women's voices on religion and culture. Though not a formal place of study with paid staff or lecturers, the leadership of the Ghana Circle managed the Institute on voluntarily basis. Through the selflessness of the women who worked on voluntary basis and prudent management of the five-year Ford Foundation grant, the programmes of the Institute were stretched to cover two more years in addition to the expected five year that was required by the project. After a couple of years, the work of the Institute spread over three rooms at the women's Hall, prompting the need to relocate.

The Institute as the Ghana Circle

The success of the Regional Circle group from 1999 to 2002, especially in organizing the logistics for conferences at zonal and national levels could not have been achieved without the strong support system it enjoyed from the Institute. Members of the Ghana Circle voluntarily worked for long hours, sometimes spending their own resources, to see the growth and success of the Institute. All these were possible by the able leadership of Prof. Elizabeth Amoah, Prof. Rabiātu Ammah, Dr. Lorene Rosemary Nyarko, and Rev. Dinah Abbey Mensah. The passion for the success of the work of the Circle was strong enough to accommodate all criticisms and penalizations that questioned their commitment as mothers, as well

as their official responsibilities as female faculty members of their universities and female ministers in their various churches. Hence, the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture was for the first seven years of its inauguration the home and nerve Centre for the administrative activities of the Circle.

In consultation with the then Principal of the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon then, Rev. Dr. Dan Antwi, and the Governing Council of the seminary allocated a space at the southern section of their land where the students used to have a fishpond for the construction of offices for the Institute. The design of the Talitha Qumi Centre is a symbol of a woman (the Ekuaba doll) with four (4) heads meeting at the center from angles. The head, known as the Plenary Hall, is shaped in a circle, a round space where the women met to discuss issues affecting them without intimidation. In this space, the women would sit in a circle during meetings to indicate their oneness and solidarity. The four wings symbolize how women are drawn from the North, South, East and West to the centre. Mr. Kwame Boham and Dr. Amankwah supported the building projects of the Institute with their Engineering know how while Mr. John Blay created the logo of the Institute



The Four Wing facility has a two hundred and fifty (250) seater conference hall, a fourteen (14) double bed dormitory rooms with ten (10) office rooms and a library, librarian's office, bookstore, and storeroom. The dormitory wings are to serve as accommodation for participants at events organized by the Institute. The office (or the flexi wing as it was called) has one room reserved as a playroom for women who may have come for seminars with their babies.

From 1997 to 2007 every fund that was raised, including stipends and gifts from Mercy's personal work was channeled into the building of the Institute named the Talitha Qumi Centre. The project begun with the Director's Residence and a garage now named the Hearth. By 2010, the

three rooms at the women's hall were becoming too small for the work so the Institute had to move to the Hearth as a temporary office. The relocation also made the rooms available for more female student intake at the Seminary. The completion of the Talitha Qumi Centre was crucial for the creation of a safe space where women would come to discuss issues that troubled their well-being without intimidation. In 2012, the Institute moved its administrative workspace from the Hearth into the Talitha Qumi Centre to make room for accommodating some participants during conferences as the Hearth while then Director, continued to live in her own residence. Presently, the Hearth serves as a temporary accommodation for male students from the Galevo hall of the Trinity Theological Seminary, whose hall is being renovated.

The presence of the Institute at the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon made the Director, Prof. Mercy Oduyoye join the teaching faculty of the Seminary. She made a great contribution to women and gender studies by virtue of her wealth of knowledge and experience. The Institute contributed in building the image of the Seminary, especially in seeking full accreditation as a Chartered Institution authorized to award its own degrees. Prof. Mercy Oduyoye retired for the second time in 2017 from the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture as its first director, with a hope that her work and vision would be continued by the Seminary that first welcomed and provided its initial accommodation.

In 2002 the leadership of the Circle moved from Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro to Dr. Isabel Phiri. In 2016, the relationship between the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, the Talitha Qumi Centre and the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon was revisited. The President of the Seminary was Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante. It was agreed after series of meetings that the Trinity Theological Seminary absorbs the Talitha Qumi Centre and the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture. The Seminary was to appoint a new management board under which the programs of the Institute was to continue. In September 2017, Mrs. Joyce Boham was appointed as the manager of the Institute and became a Seminary Staff when the Director, Prof. Mercy Oduyoye proceeded on retirement.

Partnerships and Fundraising

The work of the Institute has been possible through the help of other organizations, associations and agencies as well as the women themselves. These groups were made up of both local and global partners such as Fellowship of the Least Coin, Presbyterian Church USA – Women, United Methodist Church USA – Women, Basel Mission, Evangelisches Missions WERK, Global Fund for Women and Fund to Aid Protestant.

Apart from these groups the Institute generated funds internally through two main projects. The first was ‘Naming our mothers’ – a project created to honor the names of the women who have played significant roles in their lives. The names of mothers, daughters, queens, spouses, healers, women who founded clans and villages..., in order that their names are not lost to posterity. For this project donors were encouraged to donate an amount of money in honor of these significant women in their lives. The Second fundraising project was named “Women in Mission’ – a project dedicated to recalling the names and stories of women who have contributed to mission work in Ghana but whose names were missing in the narratives of Christianity in Ghana but only found in the Mission Cemeteries i.e Abokobi Presbyterian Cemetery.

Some key events organized by the Institute

Activities at followed a planned schedule. The months of January and February were for focus group retreats, where pertinent issues relating to the community in question would be discussed. From March to September, Way Forward Seminars were organized, which usually overlapped with National, Biennial and Pan African conference organized between the months of August to October.

The Way Forward seminars were held in most of the regions in Ghana. This was a public education to discuss issues that concerned the regions in Ghana. The Way Forward Seminars were held in cities and towns that had a large number of churches, mosques, and educational institutions to get people of faith, women and men, groups and individuals together. Notable among the Way Forward Seminars were in Cape Coast, Ho, Adidome, Kumasi, Sunyani, Bolgatanga, Abetifi, Peki, Ho,

Abokobi, Greater Accra, Winneba, Wa, Gambaga. The focus was to un-mute women's voices and to throw light on the margins of society in a hope to establish religion as a life-giving and life-enhancing factor in every woman's life. The Way Forward seminars were usually a three-day program with the first day being the opening Ceremony. This was followed by a two-day residential workshop for about 30 selected people. At the workshop, papers are read on the relevant issues with a view to finding ways of involving Faith Communities and Theological Institutions in discussing what is at stake and to recommend ways of participating in bringing about life enhancing changes.

The following are some of the conferences and seminars held:

- The Institute organized the Circle's Pan-African Conference held in Nairobi from the 24th of August to 3rd of September 1996. The conference was attended by about one hundred and fifty participants from about twenty countries under the theme "Hospitality in the Household of God."
- Following the Pan-African conference held in September 1996 in Nairobi, the Institute helped the English-Speaking West Africa Circle to organize a follow-up conference themed the Earth belongs to God, which concluded that where God Reigns, women feel safe and prosper as an integral part of the commonwealth of God's creation. From this conference came the book 'Where God Reigns'.
- On the 17th of March 2000, the Institute had its first national conference at the Talitha Qumi Centre on the theme 'Overcoming Violence Against Women: A Challenge to Ghana's Faith Communities.' Participants of the conference also included women's groups from both Charismatic and Pentecostal churches.
- From the 27th-29th September 2000, the Institute held a workshop on Gender Sensitivity in Accra under the theme, 'Women of Faith Searching for Equality and Development in the year 2000 and Beyond.' This was attended by church women's groups from various churches including but not limited to the Presbyterian, Methodist and Evangelical Presbyterian Churches in Accra. Ghana Muslim women's Association and the Federation of Muslim Women's Association

(FOMWAG) were also represented. So also in attendance were student representatives from the University of Ghana and Trinity Theological Seminary.

- Doubling as a project of the Ghana Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the Institute organized a Pan-African Women Theologians Conference in Accra on the theme ‘Overcoming Violence: African Women of Faith Speak.’ on 30th July 2000. In attendance for this conference were women theologians from all Circle chapters in Africa (East, West, South and Central Africa). Also, in attendance were friends of the Circle from the diaspora, various women’s groups in Ghana not forgetting the Queen mothers in Accra and some parts of the Central Region of Ghana.
- For the Central Region, Winneba also participated in the national conference from the 4th to the 9th of October 2000 discussing “New Beginnings for creating gender sensitivity in our Nation” for the various church and Muslim women’s groups in Winneba. This closed Way-forward seminars and conference for the year 2000.
- From 17th to 20th of Jan 2001, the Institute focused on the Volta Region of Ghana discussing under the theme “Contribution of the Church and Society toward the Liberation and Rehabilitation of *Trokosi* victims. This was a collaborative effort between the Ark Foundation, the Institute, and some traditional leaders in the Adidome area. After discussions and negotiations with the head of a particular shrine, some slave girls were released and set up by the Ark Foundation in sewing.
- A National Conference was organized in Accra on the theme: Religion and Human Sexuality: Focus on HIV/AIDS on 9th April 2002. The national conference was attended by women from the various churches, NGOs and students from some selected universities. The Institute together with some faculty members from the Religious Studies Department from the University of Ghana planned to focus on another angle of violence against women when they went to Gambaga looking at the issue of witchcraft.

- The Ethiopia 2002 conference was on the HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Africa. It looked at how religion and culture could be used as a resource against stigmatization and the role women theologians could play. Participants came from Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone Members coming from Eastern, Western, Southern and Central Africa as well as Circle friends from the Diaspora.
- A follow-up of the Addis 2002 Conference was the Anglophone West Africa conference held in 2003 in Ghana and 2004 in Nigeria, all reiterating the voice of the Circle on the use of religion and culture in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the role of African women theologians.
- From the 23rd-27th April 2003, a Way Forward Seminar was organized for the people of Gambaga on the theme: Probing the Religious Roots of Witchcraft. The inmate of the Gambaga witches camp were visited and presented with cloths and other items. The Gambaga experience necessitated further discussion on the theme.
- On the 6th of October 2003, a Pan-African Conference on Culture, Religion and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS was held by the Centre. The Keynote speaker then, Prof. S.A. Amoah from the Ghana AIDS Commission educated participants who were Circle members from East, West and Southern Africa as well as sisters from the Diaspora on the key roles religion and culture plays in dealing with the pandemic.
- A conference in Kumasi on the theme 'Witches, Widows and Women's Wisdom: The Tradition Continues' was held on the 20th of September 2004 for Women's Fellowship members of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Kumasi.
- Another national conference was organized from 28th-31st August 2006 on the theme: Disempowering Language: Women Are Their Own Enemies. The discussion which took place in the form of a debate was interesting with students from the Religious Studies department from the University of Ghana and Trinity Theological Seminary debating on the theme.
- On the 23rd of May 2007, there was a one-day conference on the theme: Ghana @ 50: Women of Faith Celebrate the Future held at the University of Ghana Legon for all stakeholders.

- Between 2007 and 2014 the Institute held seminars at Kumasi, Cape Coast, Adidome, and Koforidua to discuss widowhood rites and the killing of women before and during national elections. The Adidome seminar also focused on *Trokosi* while the Koforidua seminar also focused on bead making.
- In 2015 attention of events were turned towards the safety of the girl child with a particular interest in the Kayayos in Accra. Based on this a Seminar was organized at the Talitha Qumi Centre on the theme “Creating Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: The Role of Religion.” The event brought together church women’s group, Muslim women’s groups and some Kayayos from Madina in Accra.
- The 2016 Election was a major election for Ghana and the Institute found it necessary to conscientize the women to ensure that the youth stayed out of trouble. To address this, a seminar was organized on the theme: Towards Peaceful Elections: The Role of Religion and Culture.
- In 2017 two conferences were organized. One focused on the marriage of minors with a focus on “The Role of Religion and Culture in the Marriage of Minors”, and the other was on the interpretation of Masculinity in Africa in the 21st Century. The one-day conference on Masculinity in Africa: Tradition and Modernity” sought to draw attention to how sons were raised in the past and to decide whether the same strategy was suitable for the 21st Century.
- In 2018 Institute turned its attention to women’s health looking at breast cancer. The Institute organized a “Public Education on Breast Cancer: The Role of the Church”. The event attended by representatives of church and Muslim women’s groups, students and staff of the Seminary, faculty of the Seminary and Ghana Circle Members gave opportunities for free screening to those who so wanted. At this event were also dieticians from the 37 Military Hospital to teach the participants of health eating habits.
- Since 2018 the major program of the Institute has been the Gender Studies in Ministry program organized for the Seminarians. The studies are grouped under four (4) thematic areas: Sociology of Gender in Ministry, Legal issues of Gender in Ministry, Theological issues of Gender in Ministry, and Biblical Issues of Gender in Ministry.

Publications

The publications and circulars were for the benefit of those who were working on issues of gender as the experiences of women in the front line. However, behind it was the vision to encourage African women to write their own stories. These publications served as evidence of the voices and experiences of women on the cultural and religious issues raised. The notable books are:

1. *Transforming Power: Women in the household of God*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, from the proceedings of the Circle's Pan-African Conference in 1996.
2. *"Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God's World"*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and published in 1996.
3. *When Silence Is No Longer an Option*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Oduyoye and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
4. *Too Painful to Tell*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Rabiātu Ammah and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
5. *Poems of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Pamela Martin and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
6. *Women in Religion and Culture, Essays in Honor of Constance Buchanan*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and published in 2007.

Relevance of the Institute

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that the Institute has made an impact in the lives of women in Africa and in Ghana in particular. First, many women have come to appreciate the need to address religious and cultural practices that work against the lives of women.

Oduyoye (2007), describes African religion and culture as plagued with gender insensitivity and sexism, diseases which according to her, can only be cured through a collaborative and conscious effort by African women and men who are ready to re-examine culture and religion for their disempowering traits and suppressing roles. African women's theology draws much from women's experience and not theology that is remote and removed from their daily living, yet holding on to the Bible.

Oduyoye, points out that for the African women theologians, however, the Bible cannot be the only norm because, “any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless (2001:12).” At least, if the Bible teaches that in Christ there is no male or female, it should not be hard to accept but that is not the case. It takes a conscious effort and plan to help society embrace the word of God and that is what the Institute has been doing. In the same way, the biblical texts of terror used to sideline and control women has been highlighted leading to renewed interpretations that affirm both men and women in need of the grace of God. The physical and psychological damage caused by religion in the past through the advocacy of the Institute is being transformed by God.

African women have explored new ways of reading the Bible. For example, Prof. Musa Dube explains *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics as derived from the term *talitha cum* in the Markan story of Mark 5:21-43. This approach captures the imagination of African women theologians, represents the struggles of African women against colonial powers and patriarchal oppression, with the highly desired results of liberation and life, provides hope for gender empowerment, and is magnetic to African women since it embodies the arts of hope, healing, resurrection, and liberation (2009). Dube, sums this up by saying, “*Talitha cum* African women’s hermeneutics is therefore the practice of living daily in confrontation with international oppression of the past and present, gender oppression of the past and present, and physical wounds of the past and present.” (2009:133-146)

The Institute has promoted the reading of the Bible where cultural symbols are made to dialogue with the biblical text to critically examine the interaction of biblical texts with African people and their culture. Similarly, some cultural practices have impinged on the humanity of women and the Institute has advocated for the re-examination of norms and traditions that have been handed down through generations. Oduyoye (2007), points out that the Ghanaian culture is structured in a way that breeds injustice against women. The idolization of marriages, inheritance laws, harmful cultural practices and economic policies all create avenues for the perpetuation of violence and injustice against women. Oduyoye (2007), argues that African languages are full of verbal violence

that seeks to subdue and marginalize the humanity of women. Some Ghanaian idioms question women's ability and capacity to reason. For example, clichés as *ɛmaa adwen* (literally "women's thought") is used to describe ideas that are unacceptable, hence a derogatory way to discard all contributions by women. Akitunde, also illustrates how the society uses cultural practices to brainwash women into submissiveness to men (2007:105). Sackey, argues that traditionally, women who are outstanding are also branded as witches, as they do not stay in the status quo (2007:79). Sackey, points out that those who challenged the status quo are branded as strict, strong and tough who try to rub shoulders with men and outshine them or as witches (2007:82). The Institute has consistently challenged the sense of entitlement inherent in the language to ensure that African cultures are not hostile to women and as such do not suffer verbal, mental and physical violence. According to Prof. Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, "Violence against women is not a sectarian issue; it is a human rights issue. It is a fundamental right for all humans not for one group but to all and this is what the Circle demands of the Church." (2006:41)

The Institute has advocated that a culture that limits the dignity of women to mothering and the unapologetic orientation that women's reproduction and sexuality only benefits men without recognizing women's opinion or choices, keeps women in check, mutilates their intellect capacities by linking their worthiness is derived only from being obedient to the culture. That does not mean African women are kicking against culture. In the words of Musimbi Kanyaro in Njoroge and Dube, "African women are custodians of cultural practices; for generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation." (2001:159). The Institute has created avenues where women can speak against cultures that subdue and marginalize women. It has empowered women and men to recognize the humanity of women and address issues of violence, inhumane cultural practices and exploitative belief systems, that disempower, marginalize, and subdue women handed through generations.

The achievements of the Institute are not without challenges. First, the major problem has to do with people of faith putting hurdles in the way of the Institute to empower women. Some heads of institutions, pastors, and religious women leaders do not encourage women under their care to take advantage of programs organized by the Institute. Second, the foundations of the Institute built on voluntary and sacrificial services has waned after the first generation of women passed on the baton to subsequent generations. Third, the Institute, together with the Circle, has demystified theology only to those who reside in theological institutions but for all people of faith in the margins there is more to be done. Isabel Apawo Phiri wrote about a challenge a decade ago that the study of theology is linked with the ordained ministry because the initial missionaries who came to Africa, making women feeling reluctant to be part of the discipline. This challenge still persists. Phiri (2008) encourages that, more should be done to engage more women to read the Bible theologically to affect their world. Finally, the absence of a board steering the affairs of the Institute continues to create challenges for its smooth running.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the development and achievements of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture /Talitha Qumi Centre, Legon Ghana from 1996 to 2022. It established that following the Circle's inauguration in 1989, African women started to make various strides to establish themselves in the fight for empowerment. From the mid-1990s, the struggle for the recognition and inclusion of women at tables for decision making also picked up. The 1996 Nairobi conference saw the need to create commissions that were to focus on various aspect of the Circle's work. Some women theologians created the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture through an initial funding from Ford Foundation and individual donations. The Institute was located at the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon and was inaugurated on the 13th of March 1999 as the administrative arm of the Circle. By 2012, the Institute had built the Hearth and the Talitha Qumi Centre for conferences and to accommodate participants.

Through various conferences and seminars, the Institute has supported the advocacy for women empowerment, challenging religious and cultural biases against women, and helped women in entrepreneurship. Despite all these successes for over two decades, it is sad to notice that some religious leaders do not encourage women under their care to take advantage of programs organized by the Institute. Many women are not taking advantage of the open doors to study theology. Also, the voluntary spirit that was seen among the pioneers that established the Institute has gone down. However, a good seed has been planted, and God is watering it.

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