

The Ordination of Women in Africa: a historical perspective

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The ordination of women is important for the full integration of women in the Church, affirmation of women's equality, and empowerment of women's ministry in the face of the interlinked problems of gender inequality, poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS. Ordination provides a space for women to contribute to the well-being of the people in a given society. Like other continents, Africa has had ordained women for three decades or more, as deacons, priests and ministers in various denominations. It is better to qualify what one means by Africa, however, for it is not a homogenous cultural set and its inhabitants are not members of a homogenous cultural system.

Africa is the second largest continent on earth, measuring about 5,000 miles from North to South and about 4,600 miles from East to West. With a population slightly less than 14% of the world total the reality of Africa and African goes far beyond the continent and the people who live there. There is great ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity among Africans. To the untrained eye, all Africans might look alike, but a judicious anthropologist could make out the tell-tale physical features that belong to various African tribes. This paper presents a general picture of the ordination of women within the multicoloured spectrum of contemporary challenges that Africa is facing

1 Ordination of women: the diversity

Before looking at the diversity in the ordination of women, it is proper to point out the overwhelming presence of African women in the churches, attesting to the fact that the Church is sustained by their unceasing devotion. Nevertheless, men take up the paid and officially recognised leadership positions. Even if they are in the majority in their churches, women continue to be subjected to a subordinate role, with their presence and their needs not fully recognised. Through the ordination debate women have

begun questioning their positions and in some instances there are those who have been ordained and appointed to some key positions in their churches.

The ordination of women is not a new phenomenon in the continent. There have been women ordained in the mainline churches since the late 1970s, although there is no uniformity. One denomination ordains women in one part and does not do so in another part. In the Anglican tradition, some provinces have ordained women while others have not. Within a province, some dioceses will have ordained women while others will not. The same diversity of practice is present among member denominations of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

In Kenya, for example, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa has ordained women since 1980 but the Reformed Church of East Africa has not done so yet, and looks as if it will take a while to do so. The Lutheran tradition is similarly diverse, and while Lutherans have women ministers in most parts of Africa, in some parts of Kenya they do not. The Moravian Church has women ministers in some provinces but not in others. The ordination of women is as complex as the denominations themselves. Its existence in a given denomination largely depends on the history of that tradition, the local context and the leadership of the immediate context.

This survey is divided into three parts. First, it considers the period of the Church's missionary expansion and its effects in relation to women's ordination. Second, it looks at what has happened in the period since political independence. Third, it looks at ordination in the Anglican tradition and some wider issues associated with the ordination of women in the continent.

2 Phase one: the missionary phase

Although the early church began in Africa, modern Christianity came to Africa through a detour from North Africa to Europe and America. It then returned to Africa from Europe and America through the missionary activities of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Missionary Christianity was four-fold in its

scope, including evangelism, education, health and industrial training. Work among women was undertaken within these areas.

Missionary work among women was seen as an integral part of mission for two reasons. First, it was one way of liberating women from what the missionaries saw as the oppression of them. Labode Modupe notes that for the mission agencies during this period, women were viewed as victims of traditional practices, of food taboos, initiation, marriage and funeral rites.¹ Most missionary societies that worked in Africa adopted an evangelical theology of mission, which was consonant with the ideology of domesticity. This ideology defined woman as complementary to man, physically inferior but morally superior.² Women were supposed to be more affectionate, selfless, dependent and devout by nature. The woman's sphere was the home, which was a refuge from the public realm, in which men competed for money and power.

Since most mission agencies had adopted this ideology, they saw women as very significant in the creation of Christian families. Mission work among, and for women was therefore influenced by the ideology of separate spheres and it defined the notions of 'space, work, gender and power'.³ Missionary wives disseminated the ideology of separate spheres through home visitations, sewing lessons, childcare, cookery and prayer meetings. Ideas of domesticity were also carried into the formal

¹ Modupe Labode 'From Heathen Kraal to Christian Home: Anglican Mission Education and African Christian Girls, 1850-1900. in F. Bowie, D. Kirkwood and S. Ardener, *Women and Missions: Past and Present Anthropological and Historical Perceptions* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp.126-142.

² Mary De Jong, 'Protestant and its Discontents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' in *Women Studies*, Vol 19, 1991. p. 260

³ Henrietta L. Moore, *Space, Text and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 147–152.

education of girls, the aim of which was to make them good Christian mothers, and enable them to enter professions such as teaching if circumstances allowed. The methods and philosophy of missionary education were influenced by the ideologies of separate spheres for men and women, which were prevalent in the USA and Europe at the turn of the 19th century.⁴

When mission agencies thought about education for women they started from a fixed image of the degraded African women. Given this presumed idea of female degradation, it is not surprising that the reasons given by missionaries for taking women into their care and giving them simple literacy skills were couched in the language of moral rescue.

The other aim of mission work was to prepare Christian wives for Christian men, thus creating Christian families. So women's education included child-care and hygiene. In childcare, women were given instruction on nutrition and different feeding methods. This culminated in the preparation of Christian homes, which were seen as being important places for moral and spiritual training.

MacDannell has observed that: 'a home symbolised fundamental values of the Victorians - Christianity, civilisation, morality, aesthetics, stability, sentiment - one was not building a shelter, but a sanctuary'.⁵

⁴ Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860' in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, no.2 (Summer 1966), pp. 151-174; Char Miller, *Missions and Missionaries in the Pacific*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology' in S. Burman, (ed.), *Fit Work for Women*, (London: Oxford Women Studies, 1979), pp.15-31; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (London: Routledge,1992).

⁵ Colleen MacDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America 1840-1900*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 50. Similar views have been expressed by Nancy F. Colt in *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's sphere'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) p. 64

With the whole notion of the ideology of domesticity, there was a strong link between the home and the morality of the people. Mission work with and for women was designed in such a way that women should become wives, mothers and guardians of the family and the home. All this was based on the notion that maternal influence was of social value to society at large and the kingdom of God.

Missionary work among women was influenced by the position of women in the missionary agencies who, according to Robert Strayer, remained in a distinctly subordinate position. This fact had no small effect on missionary efforts among the African female population.⁶ Women's work was not mission as such but merely an appendage to it. It produced what are today very strong women's organisations in most mainline churches.⁷ These are the backbone of the denominations and some have been instrumental in the ordination of women to the ministry. And others are portrayed as against the ordination of women.

For instance, in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa women won the vote to become Elders in 1964. Although the request took over a decade to be granted, the women had persistently raised the issues and supported the debate until it was agreed.⁸ The first woman minister, Rev. Nyambura Njoroge, was ordained in 1980 and today there are thirty-eight women ministers.

In some churches the women's organisations have been cited as the ones that are opposed to the ordination of women more than men. Where this happens the women's organisations have fitted very

⁶ Robert Strayer, *The making of mission communities in East Africa* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1978) p. 6.

⁷ The Women's Guild (Presbyterian), Mothers' Union (Anglican) Methodist Women's Group (Methodist), United Society of Friends Women (Quakers) and Dorcas Group (Seventh Day Adventist).

⁸ Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Ghana: Legon Theological Studies Series, 2000), pp. 63-69.

well into the patriarchal structures of the church and have been used to divide the women in these same churches. This raises questions as to what ordination is for and whether it makes women into pseudo men? This paper is not dealing with this question which has implications for both men and women.

3 Phase two: post independence 1970-1985

With the post independence period in Africa, educated women began to take their rightful place in business, government, education and the professions. In most churches, however, the status quo remained and women were often kept in their subordinate status. They were marginalised and isolated in separate and unequal women's organisations. Because many churches would not ordain women they served in various different capacities.

The reasons against women's ordination have varied from one denomination to another and relate to how each denomination had been started and was structured. Common arguments put forward against women's ordination have included the notion that a priest is the icon of Christ and therefore should be male. Another argument was that Jesus appointed twelve male apostles (assumed to be leaders of the church later) and therefore ordination is only for men. Some evangelical protestant denominations have resisted the ordination of women on the grounds of 'headship' based on the practice of the late first century church described in some of the pastoral letters which deal with household codes of the time for instance Ephesians 5:21-30; Colossians 3:18-25; 1 Timothy 2:11-16; 3:1-7; 6:1-2. As well as these, individuals have advanced the arguments based on traditional African culture, which varied from one ethnic community to another, in regard to women's participation in religious ceremonies. There are some ethnic communities where women served as leaders of religious ceremonies and there are those that the practice was not accepted.

All these arguments have been open to question and during the post political independence it is within the ecumenical organisations that the debate on the ordination of women began before it was taken on by the different denominations.

It is the ecumenical initiatives that created the space for questioning the positions of the churches on the ordination of women. Issues of ordination have been easier to discuss in forums outside denominational settings rather than within them. One such place was in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), a continental organisation which was inaugurated in 1958 just after the first country in Africa Ghana became independent from the British colonial rule.

In 1963 the All Africa Conference of Churches' held its first assembly held in Kampala, Uganda, discussed the place of women in the church including their ordination. The question that the ordination of women raised was how women should be integrated into the life of the church, including its sacramental life, rather than being excluded on the basis of their gender.⁹

Meanwhile the World Council of Churches began to consider these issues and in 1970 held a consultation on the ordination of women, reported under the title *'What is Ordination coming to'*. The conference noted that the low status of women in historic mainline churches had more to do with imported Western assumptions about women's place than with their actual place in African traditional culture. In some traditional societies women had participated fully as prophets, healers and diviners. In some of the African instituted churches women held key positions if they were not founders themselves. In many communities, even within the mainline churches, it was the women who were running the churches. Brigalia Bam in a study that had been conducted by the World Council of churches noted the following:

In my view the instances cited above from both African traditional life and the prophet movements suggest that the question of the inferiority of African women in African thought and life is much exaggerated. For instance, we have discovered

⁹ Christian women of Africa Share in Responsibility: Consultation on the Responsibility of Christian women in Africa. [AACC Bulletin. Volume.1 No 3. (Nairobi: 1963.)

that in practically all-African societies women can be religious leaders (and) discharge the duties of ritual or sacred specialists. They may even rank higher in importance than their male counterparts.¹⁰

In the third AACC assembly held at Lusaka in 1974, the voices of women were also heard urging the church to include them in areas such as theological education, which was exclusively male. Even those women who accompanied their husbands in their studies were never taught. After the deliberation the a in Lusaka , the Assembly decided that there was a need for:

an advisory committee of men and women to draw up programmes for the advancement of women in all spheres of church and society. A need for churches to open doors of theological training centres to women, and the inclusion of regular courses at theological colleges for wives of pastors, laywomen and students.¹¹

In 1980 a conference was held in Ibadan, Nigeria under the title ‘African women in church and theology’. This conference discussed various aspects of this topic and passed several resolutions including ‘A call for equal rights and opportunities for service in the church as laity and ordained ministers with full pastoral responsibilities in parishes and administrative areas be assured to women’.¹²

¹⁰ Brigalia Bam, *What is Ordination coming to*, (Geneva: WCC, 1971), pp. 9-10.

¹¹ *Living no longer for ourselves but for Christ. The struggle continues* (AACC Bulletin (Vol. XI. No 2 Nairobi:1974) pp. 25-26.

¹² African Women in Church and Theology, *AACC Bulletin, Vol. XI, No 2*, p. 1980. 33.

By this time, some women had studied theology and women like Mercy Amba Oduyoye within the ecumenical forums had began putting the few women in seminaries and departments of religious studies together as way of being in solidarity, and seeking ways to encourage others in the same area.¹³

These women were few but their presence made the churches realise that they were not going to keep quiet about women in ministry, nor were women going to remain in the area of women's groups like the Mothers' Union and Women's Guilds. Within ecumenical organisations, women were able to raise all aspects of ordination and ministry, challenging cultures and readings of the biblical texts.¹⁴

Ecumenical organisations continued to play a big role in the quest for the ordination of women in various denominations, particularly through two movements set up towards the end of the 20th century. The first of these was the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), set up by the WCC to continue its study of issues surrounding women in the churches, and to raise awareness of this beyond the church as well. The decade's aims have been summarised in these terms:

In 1988 the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women was launched. It was aimed at empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their churches and communities. To affirm - through shared leadership and decision making, theology and spirituality - the decisive contributions of women in churches and communities; to give visibility to women's perspective and

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Mercy Oduyoye, 'Church women and the Church's mission' and Rose Mary Edet, 'Woman and Ministry in Africa' in *New eyes of Reading: Biblical Reflections from the Third world* by J.S. Pobee and Barbel Von Wartenberg-Potter, (Geneva: WCC, 1986), pp. 90-92; 68-80.

actions in the work and struggle for justice, peace and integrity of creation. To encourage the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.¹⁵

In Africa, national and regional gatherings launched the decade in more than a dozen countries. Some were women's events; others were mixed and included processions, seminars and workshops. Heads of churches and even heads of states participated in many of these events, which received considerable media coverage. This period in particular was when many denominations agreed to talk about ordination or began ordaining women. The number of women ordained was not many, compared to the number of men ordained during the same period, but the fact that discussions were held and some women ordained was in itself commendable.

A second significant ecumenical movement is The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which was launched in Trinity College Legon, near Accra, Ghana in 1989, a year after the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. It is an ecumenical and interfaith body of African women theologians, tracing its background from such organisation as The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), The Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (EAAT), and The Conference of African Theological Institutions (CATI). The Circle is different from the other ecumenical bodies whose membership is predominantly Christian, however, as members also include Muslim women and those from indigenous African religions.

The Circle aims to empower lay and ordained women to study and write theology which will impact on the churches. Since 1989 members have discussed various theological themes and published over a dozen books.¹⁶ The themes addressed include the Bible, an objective critique of African culture,

¹⁵ *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches during the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp. 13

¹⁶ Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa women in Central Malawi* (Blantyre: Kachere, 1997); Mary Getui, *Violence Against Women*: Nairobi:

violence against women and interfaith issues. This way of doing theology deals with issues from the experience of women, who are often in the majority in faith groups, and who have not yet been taken seriously enough.

These two movements outside the church have produced results, as seen in the increasing number of women studying theology for ordination or as laywomen. A number of women have obtained both Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. One of the mainline denominations in Kenya, which does not ordain women, has seen ten women gaining Bachelor's degree in only five years, while some of the men in senior leadership do not have a bachelor's degree.

Without these two movements, most women now offering leadership in the churches of Africa would not have seen the door of a theological college. The issue the church faces now is to talk about and with these women. There is pressure from women inside the church, and such pressure cannot continue unanswered for long. Those women who have obtained degrees in theology are impacting the church in various sectors. Across Africa today there are ordained women in most traditions of the church, usually serving largely in the lower ranks of church life.

Acton, 1996); Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds.), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (New York: Orbis, 1995); Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge, (eds.), *Groaning in Faith: African women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton, 1996); Musa Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Geneva: WCC 2001); Elizabeth Amoah (ed) *Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God's World* (Accra: Sam-Woode, 1996); Isabel Apawo Phiri, D.B Govinden and S. Nadar (eds.), *Her Stories: Hidden histories of women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002); Nyambura Njoroge & Musa Dube (eds.) *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001); Mercy Oduyoye, (ed.), *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God, proceedings of the Pan -African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (Accra: Sam-Woode, 1997).

4 Phase three: the ordination of women in the Anglican Provinces of Africa an overview

a. Events before 1978

Anglican women's ordination in Africa can be divided into two phases, with the first phase covering the period from independence to the Lambeth Conference of 1978. Although the Anglican Communion worldwide is a loose federation of Anglican provinces, it meets once every ten years in a Lambeth Conference. The conference is one of the four instruments of unity others being the Archbishops of Canterbury, the Primates meeting and the Anglican consultative Council. When the Bishops of the Anglican Communion meet after every ten years they deliberate over issues that are current and which have implications for the church. Issues of women within family and in society have been raised in several Lambeth conferences. When issues are raised resolutions are passed but it is upon each province to deliberate on implementations because the resolutions are not binding as the Lambeth conference is not a decision making body and each province is an autonomous organisation.

During the post political independence and before 1978 Lambeth conference, some of the African provinces began to discuss the ordination of women in their synods led by what I would call forward looking bishops. Some of them had allowed women to go into theological colleges and or Bible schools. In 1976 for example the then church of the Province of Kenya today the Anglican Church of Kenya, the matter of the ordination of women was raised in a provincial synod led by the late Rt. Rev. Henry Okullu whose diocese was the first one to ordain women into priesthood. After deliberation the provincial synod agreed in principle that women could be ordained but at an appropriate time. But before a diocese ordained a woman, the bishop of the diocese should examine the candidate thoroughly. Furthermore the candidate should have undergone training in a theological college in readiness for ordination. After the candidate had completed her training the bishop should further consult the House of Bishops before ordaining her. Following this discussion, some bishops began sending women to prepare for priesthood by studying theology, while others waited to see what the overall outcome would be. The Rt. Rev. Henry Okullu took this synod discussion and put it into action

by sending the late Lucia Okuthe to study theology at ST. Philip's Maseno. He later made her a deaconess in the diocese and she continued to serve under the male clergy.

Similarly the Church of Uganda had also deliberated on the issue of the ordination of women in the 1975 synod led by late Rt. Rev. Festo Kivengere. During the debate some Bishops argued that the church of Uganda should wait for the church of England's decision on the same issue. The late Bishop Kivengere did not agree with this suggestion and said:

'If you wait for the Church of England you wait until doomsday'. A bishop replied, 'well, okay, let us write a paper on the subject.' Festo snorted in derision. 'If you write a paper on it, you'll produce something for the archives which will gather dust for ever'. In the end, it was sixteen three against ordaining women immediately. So the matter was referred for debate to the diocesan synods and the provincial assembly, several years later.¹⁷

The period of the late 1970s was a difficult one in Uganda because it was when Archbishop Luwum was allegedly assassinated, under the reign of then President Idi Amin, and Bishop Kivengere was exiled from 1976-1979. While in exile, the Bishop attended the 1978 Lambeth Conference. Returning home in 1979 he ordained several women as deacons, three of them later being ordained as priests by him in 1983. This act caused an outcry from bishops who said the time was not yet right. The then Archbishop Silvanus Wani was one such opponent, to whom Bishop Kivengere wrote saying:

In vain I have been waiting to hear from my fellow Bishops who said they were going to take up the issue with their synods. I feel the delay is unfair on my lady deacons and no reason whatever has been given to me to stop this next step. My

¹⁷ Ann Coomes, *The Authorised Biography of Festo Kivengere* (Eastborne: Monarch, 1990), p. 347.

synod is fully in agreement with priesting those lady deacons who deserve to be priested ¹⁸

As well as writing to the Archbishop, the Bishop wrote to other bishops of his intention to ordain women in his diocese. On 11 December 1983, Bishop Kivengere ordained Margaret Byekwaso, Grace Dyabahika, and Debora Micungwe. Grace Ndiabahika, as she is now, is chaplain at the school of business in Makerere University today, but the whereabouts of the other two are not known.

While these events were going on in Uganda the debate in Kenya was heating up. In 1980 Bishop Okullu made deaconess Lucia Okuthe, a deacon and the battle between the Bishops began. The other Bishops led by the then Archbishop, the Rt, Rev, Mannasses Kuria challenged Bishop Okullu, on his move to make Lucia a deacon. In his response, bishop Okullu defended his move by saying that the office of deaconess had been discontinued by the Anglican Consultative Council so he had gone ahead and made her a deacon. Similarly the Lambeth conference of 1978 had passed a resolution on not having women admitted to a separate order of deaconess.¹⁹

According to Bishop Okullu the ordination of women to the diaconate was not a controversial issue, but the ordination of women to the priesthood was. The view of the then Archbishop of Kenya was that it was wrong to ordain women, even as deacons, before the Church of England had done so. Bishop Okullu was not popular in the house of Bishops and some of the bishops contemplated him being disciplined or sent out of the house of Bishops but no one had the courage to do so. Looking back one would see other issues much more than the ordination of women including ethnicity at the time and the fear of a vocal and controversial bishop for his time.

¹⁸ Coomes, *Authorised Biography*, p. 427.

¹⁹ Resolution 20 Women in the Diaconate ‘The Conference recommends, in accordance with Resolution 32(c) of the Lambeth Conference of 1968, those member Churches which do not at present ordain women as deacons now to consider making the necessary legal and liturgical changes to enable them to do so, instead of admitting them to a separate order of deaconesses.’

No other Diocese in Kenya took on the issue of the ordination of women, until after 1985, when several women had completed theological training and some had been made deaconesses even this office had been abolished. Each diocese followed its own procedures and ordained women when it could. From 1988, even those synods that had been adamantly opposed it at the beginning had begun ordaining women.

What emerges from this period and especially from the two countries Kenya and Uganda, the debate on the ordination of women was dependent largely upon the Bishops. There was a sense in which some Bishops wanted to wait for the Church of England to lead in the ordination of women. On reflection this may not have been the case but one way of delaying with a hope that the issue of ordination will disappear because of the patriarchal nature of their societies and the inherited tradition of the church. It is those Bishops who understood both the autonomy of the provinces and the dioceses that took lead in the ordination of women. They were ready to confront the issues within their own context as they understood it in the context of the wider society. Apart from the church of Uganda and the then Church of the province of Kenya the ordination of women seem not to have been an issue in other provinces in Africa during this period.

b. From Lambeth 1978 to date

The Anglican Church in Africa has a number of different provinces, which are grouped together and known as the Conference of Anglican Provinces in Africa. Since 1978 there have been many changes in the worldwide Anglican Communion, including the holding of Lambeth conferences in 1988 and 1998, and the creation of many new dioceses. The situation regarding the ordination of women differs from one province and diocese to another, as the following brief survey shows.

1. The Anglican Church of Burundi

Research has indicated that there are four women priests. The reason for such a small number compared to the men priests is lack of adequate education, especially theological education. This is not to say that men who are priests are any better at theological study, but it is harder for women to attain basic education, leave alone theological education.

2. The Church of the Province of Central Africa

The church of the Province of Central Africa covers Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, and is among the three provinces in Africa that still do not ordain women. In 1988 Bishop Ralph Hatendi of Zimbabwe said ‘a woman could be a queen, a judge or a prime minister but never a bishop. He argued that in his culture a woman would not qualify to offer the sacraments to church congregations. Should a woman be ordained in his diocese of Harare, the membership would drop because the men would walk out in protest.’²⁰ The issue here could be cultural, but in the same region studies have shown that women were active in traditional religion, so it is possible that the issue is the high Anglican Church tradition, which is prevalent in the area.

3. The Church of the Province of the Congo (Zaire)

This province has over eight dioceses and has not yet ordained women. The situation of war and terror has meant that the church is more in exile than within Congo.

4. The Anglican Church of Kenya

The Anglican Church of Kenya now has 29 dioceses, with a total of 125 women priests, a development which has happened since the 1988 Lambeth conference. Some of the dioceses went through up to 20 years of bitter debates on the ordination of women before agreeing to do so.²¹ Some dioceses did not

²⁰ Viva ‘Women Bishops: “It’s satanic” says male bishop’, August/September 1988, vol. no 4, p. 10.

²¹ For example in the Diocese of Eldoret the Anglican church of Kenya, the first motion on this was brought to Synod in 1985 but the first ordination of women only took place in 2002.

debate on the ordination of women, because they were created after a division from a diocese that had ordained women and began with having ordained women.

Most of the first generation of women priests had to work hard to prove themselves even though they worked in institutions and not in full time parish ministries. But as the numbers increased and parishes became receptive of women priests, more women have taken parish jobs some of them being rural deans and archdeacons.

The education levels of the women also differ widely; some have doctoral degrees, while others have been ordained after little or no formal theological education.

5. The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion)

The Anglican church of Nigeria, with ten provinces, maintains the following position on the ordination of women:

The church does not approve of the ordination of its women to the priesthood for now. However, the church approves the commencement of the permanent/vocational Diaconate Ministry and women are included in it. ²²

Meanwhile, other denominations in Nigeria have ordained women, including some of the African-instituted churches, Presbyterians, Methodists and Reformed.

6. The Episcopal Church of Rwanda

There are nine dioceses in the Episcopal Church of Rwanda. It agreed to ordain women in the 1990s and the first women were ordained in 1996. Of the nine dioceses only two do not ordain women and

²² George Njoku, Clerical Secretary and Director of Theological Education and Doctrinal Matters of the Church of Nigeria, writing in an email 30 May 2006.

there are currently 19 women ordained serving the church. The only other church that has ordained women is the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, which has had women ministers since 1980.²³

7. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa

This province covers the whole of South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique, Swaziland and Angola. South Africa has a number of dioceses but other dioceses cover an entire country. Discussion on the ordination of women began in 1960 but the motion to ordain women was not passed until 1992.²⁴ Since then, three surely dioceses have not ordained women, the Dioceses of Lebombo, Niassa and the island of St Helena. The highest post a woman has held is to be a cathedral dean, and the Very Rev Nangula E Kathindi now serves at St George's Cathedral in Windhoek.²⁵

8. The Episcopal Church of the Sudan

The situation in Sudan is complex because of the long-lasting war in that country. While the Episcopal Church of Sudan has 27 dioceses some of these have operated outside Sudan. The church agreed to the ordination of women at a synod meeting in Limuru, Kenya in 2002, after which the Diocese of Bor went ahead with this. However before that meeting Bishop Rorik, a government officer, had ordained his wife as a deacon and priest. Since the motion to ordain women was passed not all dioceses have done so, and the Diocese of Bor currently has six women.²⁶ Because of the war, it is impossible to

²³ Emmanuel Ngendahayo, Diocesan Secretary of Byumba Diocese., Episcopal Church of Rwanda
Email interview June 2006

²⁴ Phoebe Swart-Russell and Jonathan Draper, 'A brief history of the movement for the ordination of Women in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA)' in *Women Hold Up half the sky: Women in the church in Southern Africa* Denise Ackermann, Jonathan Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds.), (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), pp. 220-237.

²⁵ www.virtueonline.

²⁶ Interview with Mary Achong Deng, Archdeacon of Duk Panyan, Diocese of Bor, 8 May 2006.

impose the rules and regulations of ordination as they work in other provinces, and correct procedures are a low priority. Those women who have been ordained in the church are illiterate or semi-literate. Women outnumber men because most men have fled or died during the war, and it is these women who have kept the church alive.

9. The Anglican Church of Tanzania

The province, which has 17 dioceses, approved the ordination of women after the Lambeth Conference of 1988. So far only one diocese has ordained women, and currently in Tanzania there are five women, one of whom is in the diocese of Mount Kilimanjaro.

10. The Church of the Province of Uganda

The church of Uganda has 28 dioceses, and has had ordained women since 1983 when the first ordinations were done by the late Bishop Kivengere. The other ordinations took place after the 1988 Lambeth conference. The accurate numbers are not easy to obtain, though it is safe to assume that ordained women remain few in number by comparison with men.

11. The Church of the Province of West Africa

Covering the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, this province permitted each diocese to ordain women from 1987. Liberia began ordaining women the same year, followed by Sierra Leone and later the Gambia. The number of ordained women is now nine, five of them in Liberia, two in the Gambia and two in Sierra Leone. To date the dioceses in Ghana and Guinea have not started to ordain women. As in Nigeria, other churches including Presbyterian, Methodists and some African-instituted denominations have ordained women.

c. What difference has it made to have ordained women?

From the above survey it is clear that women can be seen and heard in Africa. The numbers are still small compared to those for men. Some churches are better at this than others and it will take a while before some even consider the ordination of women. The major reasons why there continues to be so

few women within the church structures are lack of theological education and the context in which most women work.

For a long time, availability of theological education for women has been linked to their ordination. As in other forms of education, churches have invested in men rather than women. For men it has been automatic that they would be seconded to study, because they would return to serve the church, whereas for women it has depended on whether the diocese concerned ordained women or not. Dioceses have feared sending single women to theological college because they could get married to men from other dioceses or denominations, which would be seen by the sending diocese as a loss. In the case of married women the worry has been for her husband, or who would take care of the family when she is studying. These reasons still persist, so that it takes twice as much for women as for men to find their way to theological college, and gain the education which will enhance their chances of working in the church as lay or ordained people.

Theological education is gendered both in content and in perspectives, which raises questions as to what ordination is for. Very few colleges have managed to engender theological education so that it is for the whole people of God rather than for an exclusive group of men. In addition, it should be noted that African forms of Christianity are still interpreted through the eyes of traditional African cultures, as illustrated by the following episode:

Ndonga was serving as a priest in a local parish which was well mixed, men and women, professional and laity. Her first children were triplets and she had them when serving in another parish. The new parish knew her as a mother of triplets and the boys were a joy for the congregation. Ndonga became pregnant again and gave birth to a baby girl. As usual she was entitled to a maternity leave of sixty working days. The parish council did what was needful to allow Ndonga to rest after delivery. When the maternity days were over Ndonga reported back to work and

there was panic in the church. Both men and women asked if she did not need more time to be away. On the surface it would appear the members wanted Ndonga to rest, but underneath it was the belief that she was not yet out of the state of having a baby to take her role as a priest. This was communicated to Ndonga in a language that made her know the reason why the members were not yet ready for her.²⁷

One is left wondering whether the attitudes shown in this story are from traditional culture or from the reading of scripture, especially the Old Testament, or even from an amalgamation of both. The story indicates that both traditional culture and readings of the Old Testament are used still to deny women entry to priesthood. I have written elsewhere on the wait for women bishops in Africa, citing the traditional reasons given as to why women are not bishops and why it will take a while before they become so.²⁸ This is not the whole picture, however, because researches that have been done on culture show that women in some African cultures served as priests, and it was only after the arrival of Christianity that their roles changed.²⁹

In the light of this African women, both lay and ordained, have embraced culture critically, appropriating and reviving some cultural practices and values that are life-giving and affirming. At the same time they have challenged those practices and values that are not life-affirming, as in the case of Ndonga and her parish. The presence of women of child bearing age in the parishes provides

²⁷ Ndonga oral interview April 2006, Kabuku Kenya.

²⁸ Esther Mombo, Why Women Bishops Are Still on the Waiting list in Africa in *The Call for Women Bishops* by Harriet Harris and Jane Shaw (eds.), (London: SPCK, 2004), pp. 163-167.

²⁹ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, pp. 21-42 and Mercy Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa, African Women and Patriarchy*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

opportunities for them to pass on positive practices and values while discarding those attitudes that hamper women's humanity and their full participation in all spheres of life. A critical analysis of some of these negative practices points to patriarchy as the source of these evils. Even if there are instances where some negative practices have been discarded, others that relate to women are still kept. The inconsistency in this area shows that it is the dominant groups in society which decide what is valuable in the community. A patriarchal mind-set always holds the existence of cultural practices that involve the domination of others as the natural norm.

Lack of theological education and cultural norms are among the evident reasons that inhibit women from either seeking ordination or fully participating in the ministries of the church. These are on the surface, but the fundamental problem is one of inequality in power relations between women and men. This existed in traditional societies, but was re-enforced by colonialism and justified by the theological positions and teaching of the churches.

As this is the context in which the ordained women work, their role therefore is to challenge the systems which deny them full participation in the churches. They are doing this in several ways, including engendering theological education and theologising on issues of life.

d. Engendering theological education

In writing about theology in Africa, Mercy Oduyoye has talked of a two winged theology, for a bird with one wing cannot fly.³⁰ The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women helped to create critical awareness of women's theological concerns, both in the churches and in theological institutions. These issues include HIV/AIDS, violence against women, sex and stigma. The task of engendering theological education is about creating a curriculum that will take seriously the issues that are facing the churches, especially the women.

³⁰ Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *Talitha Qumi, Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989* (Ibadan:Daystar Press, 1990). p. 31.

The process of engendering theological education is firstly to encourage women to study theology which has been a preserve of men for two reasons. First because of the way scripture has been interpreted and some forms of traditional African cultures have been used. Second because theological education was for those who were going to the ordained ministry of the church. For these reasons women remained on the periphery of church ministry, engaged in service roles rather than leadership roles. But with the re-interpretation of scriptures, the de-linking of theological education from ordination, women who would not previously have had a chance to study and serve in the church, are able to do so. The separation of theological education from ordination has also allowed women from a variety of backgrounds to study. Before this it was difficult for female candidates to face training committees, and defend their call to ministry, as they were judged in accordance to their social location and or marital status. These affected women across the board in different ways. Those who were married had to justify their calling in regard to the position of their husbands and whether they had approval of to study theology for ordination. Those who were single were equally disadvantaged because the boards feared they would be married off during their training thus the church or diocese would lose out. Those who were single mothers did not have a chance because of the social stigma on them by the society in general but especially the church. The underlying factors for all this was the fear of female sexuality within the patriarchal society, where women are seen as morally weak and those who wield the power to lure men into scene. Bringing them to 'holy ground' male space in the study of theology would contaminate the space.

In order to deal with the above it was important to unlink theological education from ordination. The fruits of this have been witnessed by the increase of the number of women choosing to study theology. In one institution an analysis of six years the number rose from ten women to one hundred.³¹ The

³¹ St Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya. Registrar's records 2007.

women come different backgrounds and marital status. There are those that are married, separated and or divorced, single mothers etc. The challenge for these women has been largely on funding for their studies. While some of the churches have not objected to their training, most of them have not funded the women. But after completion of the studies most of the women have been absorbed into the churches in various capacities. In a survey done on women graduates showed a variety of ministries including ordination. In the Anglican church some dioceses had appointed these women to various positions including archdeacons which is a senior position in a diocese. While the church may not have invested in the theological education of these women, they use them after training.

The above analysis shows how engendering theological education has dealt with increasing the number of women doing theological education. The second process of engendering theological education has to do with the curriculum of theological education in terms of structure and content so that it is open to preparing men and women, for ministry in the church and society. This process has encouraged the development of a gender sensitive curriculum in all areas of teaching, one that takes note of the presence of women as majority in many churches.

While adding new units onto the existing curriculum, the project also advocates seeing issues of women in the church and society as mainstream concerns within the curriculum. In order to do this, the production of literature has been one key area for most theological subjects. Engendering theological education also means ensuring that the delivery of theological information acknowledges the presence of women, not only as objects of study but as participants in the study. Courses such as masculinity, gender and theology, and women's theologies are part of the theological curriculum. The end product of this kind of theological education is to prepare women and men who are sensitive to the needs within society.

e. HIV/AIDS and related issues

As well as engendering theological education, those women who have studied theology, whether lay or ordained, are theologising life in the face of death. This is because of the daunting challenges facing Africa. The continent is said to have the highest proportion of its people in the world living in situations of extreme poverty; war, political instability, social disintegration and economic stagnation. This is reflected in devastating diseases like malaria which has grown more deadly and resistant to drugs. HIV/AIDS is decimating communities and undermining growth, particularly in the socio-economic sector, and adversely affecting human resources. The statistics of UNAIDS, the United Nations organisation involved in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, state:

in 2005 there were worldwide over 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS. Of these, 25.8 million lived in sub-Sahara Africa.³² Although Africa houses only 10% of the world population, it contains 64% of the HIV-infections. UNAIDS research shows that out of 23.7 million HIV-infected adults in sub-Sahara Africa 13.5 million are women.

The women's share in Africa is 57% while worldwide this is 46%.³³

Many would ask why this is the case, when other researches show that education about HIV/AIDS is no longer the issue in most settings. The reason why women in Africa are suffering disproportionately from HIV/AIDS is due partly to biological differences between men and women but in particular to gender-differences. Reports of organisations such as UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation refer to the social and cultural constructions of being male and being female in Africa, which are strengthening the vulnerability of women to HIV-infection.³⁴ Part of these constructions are the social,

³² UNAIDS, *AIDS Epidemic Update*, December 2005, 1,3

http://www.unaids.org/epi/2005/doc/report_pdf.asp

³³ UNAIDS, *AIDS Epidemic Update*, December 2005, 1,4

³⁴ D Whelan, *Gender and HIV/AIDS: Taking stock of research and programmes* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 1999); *Gender and HIV/AIDS: UNAIDS Technical Update*, (Geneva: UNAIDS, 1998); *Facing the*

economic and power relations between women and men, and cultural practices such as bride prices and widow inheritance.

The process of engendering theological education has meant teaching theology in the light of the issues facing society especially those emanating from HIV/AIDS. Even if both women and men are educated in the same way on issues of HIV/AIDS, the women have taken lead in seeking ways of dealing with the issues in a wider context. Through the Circle of Concerned women theologians, the lay and ordained women of the church are busy dealing with issues emanating from HIV/AIDS in terms of prevention and care for the dying. They are doing this in workshops, preaching, conferences and in writing books that can be used to sensitise communities of learning. For instance in 2002 a continental conference was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia with the theme ‘Sex, stigma and HIV/AIDS: African women challenging religion, culture and social practices.’ In 2007 another conference was held on a similar theme.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians gives a gender-based response to this call, since African women are hit most because of the unequal power relations between men and women. For women theologians the gender factor is one of the social structures that makes HIV/AIDS an issue of justice. According to the Circle, ‘if we do not deal with gender and HIV, the world will not make a difference in combating the virus.’³⁵

challenges of HIV/AIDS/STDs: a gender-based response (Amsterdam/Harare/Geneva:

KIT,SAfAIDS,WHO,1995).

³⁵ Isabel Apawo Phiri, ‘African women of faith speak out in an HIV/AIDS era’ in I.A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M. Masenya (eds.), *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), p. 8.

Meanwhile, four Circle books on HIV/AIDS have been published.³⁶ As well as naming and critiquing the cultural and social issues that strengthen the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS, the writings provide an alternative way of reading the scriptures in the context of HIV/AIDS. They are read from the perspective of justice and of God being on the side of the exploited, marginalised and discriminated against, namely those who are powerless. The book *Grant me justice* is an example of this kind of reading of the scriptures.³⁷ The aim of the Circle is to establish a society with just relations, where service has been moved away from the hierarchical power of dominance.

f. Challenging power issues in the church

Whether it is in combating HIV/AIDS by raising gender issues, or engendering theological education, or challenging violence against women in all its forms, the fundamental problem is one of inequality in power relations between women and men, which exists even within the life of churches. This is too often reinforced by the theological positions and teaching of the churches themselves.

Lay and ordained women are calling on the churches to look inward and question the years when scripture has been misused and patriarchal structures uncritically accepted within culture and history. All of this made the church an accomplice and sometimes a major player in terms of inequality between women and men. Women are often denied full participation in all aspects of the life of the church, even in cases where they have experienced God's call to service. Instead of a holistic approach

³⁶ Phiri, Haddad and Masenya, *African Women, HIV/AIDS*; M.W. Dube and M. Kanyoro (eds.), *Grant me justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004); T. Hinga, A. Kubai and P. Mwaura (eds.), *HIV/AIDS, Women and Religion in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2005); D.O. Akintunde, E. Amoah and D.B.E.A. Akoto (eds.), *Cultural Practices and HIV/AIDS: African Women's Voices* (Accra: Sam-Woode, 2005).

³⁷ Dube and Kanyoro, *Grant me justice*, p. 19.

to human beings, the church has often resorted to an empty dualism, in which it has focussed on spiritual needs and ignored the needs of the body.

Because of its influential role in terms of formal and informal education, the church can provide leadership in changing societal attitudes and has definitely been an instrument of change in many aspects of life. Considering that the majority of its members are women, it should not be difficult to pass on the message of change in relation to their status. What appears to be the problem, however, is that in some ways the church has not wanted this to happen. Perhaps because of its predominantly patriarchal nature it has thus far not allowed or encouraged change in terms of attitudes towards women.³⁸

As a result of this, those organisations in the churches which are predominantly women-led have remained a source of survival for most women, providing them with spiritual and moral support. In many cases women find in these groups a way to exercise their freedom to minister to one another, to explore scriptures together, to speak of their family lives and their lives as a whole. Organisations such as the Mothers' Union (Anglican), Women's Guild (Presbyterian) United Society of Friends Women (Quakers) and others within the various denominations remain a source of strength for many in these churches, though they are limited in their hermeneutical critique of patriarchy. The need therefore is for women to stand together with each other and refuse to be divided by being lay or ordained, theologically trained or not. This is what projects like engendering theological education are meant to do for all women.

As noted above, the real issue of women in the church lies in the inequality of power relations between men and women. In this case, ecclesiastical and clerical powers need to be transformed in such a way that opportunities for their misuse are eliminated. Ecclesiastical power must become a shared power of

³⁸ Hazel Ayanga, 'Liberation of the African woman' in Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng (eds.), *Theology of Reconstruction, Exploratory Essays* (Nairobi: Acton publishers, 1999) p. 101.

caring, community building, just relations and service, moving away from the hierarchical power of dominance.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the ordination of women in Africa in broad terms and the impact that ordained women have had in the churches. It has shown that each denomination has a different history even if within mission work all women were originally treated the same. The survey of women's ordination in the Anglican provinces of Africa has shown that there is no uniformity of practice for this practice in the continent, even within one denomination. The argument presented has been that ordained women still live and work in the shadow of African traditional culture, which is part of the problem-riddled context of the church in modern Africa. As this paper has shown, some women have chosen to deal with that context differently, by engendering theological education and placing within the mainstream issues of gender and power relations within theological education.

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