

Isabel Apawo Phiri

Centering the Voices of Women in Africa

MARY C. "POLLY" HAMLEN

Since the establishment of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (known as “the Circle”) in 1989, there has been a significant increase in the number of African women scholars contributing to theology, biblical hermeneutics, ethics, and religious studies (Phiri 2005b). Yet their voices continue to be underrepresented in theological education in Africa and globally (Oredein 2020; Nadar and Phiri 2010, 99–100). This paper will highlight the work of one notable member of the Circle—Dr. Isabel Apawo Phiri—a scholar-activist and ecumenical leader from Malawi who has dedicated her career to engendering theological education in Africa. She has made significant contributions toward increasing the visibility of African women’s perspectives in the academy and the church.

Phiri is deputy general secretary for public witness and diakonia for the World Council of Churches. Previously, she was dean and



Image 1: Dr. Isabel Apawo Phiri

head of the School of Religion, Theology, and Classics at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Phiri 2019). She is a founding member of the Circle (Fiedler 2017, 82) and served as the general coordinator for six years (Phiri 2019). As a scholar, her field focuses on the interplay of gender, culture, and religion. She critiques patriarchal models of church leadership and lifts up aspects of African indigenous religious traditions that affirm women's spiritual gifts and leadership. Her work embraces oral traditions as a mode of theology, affirming that African women express religious beliefs and theological reflection through songs, proverbs, and storytelling. Her scholarly work also reveals the complexity and diversity of religious expression in Africa, which is often simplified and homogenized by western scholarship and non-African feminism (Dube 2000, 20). As an activist, Phiri has worked to promote gender justice in the church and to combat gender-based violence. She has responded to the needs of persons affected by HIV and AIDS, produced contextually relevant materials for theological education, and centered justice work as a critical element of Christian faith and witness.

This biography will examine how Phiri's own life experiences as an African woman shaped her career and commitments as a scholar-activist. It will review her contributions to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the Centre for Constructive Theology,

and the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa, ecumenical theological education, and the public witness and diakonia of the World Council of Churches. In so doing, this biography will foreground the ways that Phiri has centered African women's voices in her work. Her example offers insights into how scholar-activists can transform institutions by including underrepresented perspectives in their work. It also has implications for the emerging field of digital humanities and the importance of including African women's voices in digital spaces.

Family and Faith

In her writings, Isabel Apawo Phiri situates her personal story within the larger story of the Chewa people (Phiri 2007b). This cultural identity reveals the complexity of national identity in Africa, where European colonialism defined national borders that artificially separated peoples of shared cultural identity. The history of Malawi includes many waves of migration to the region, including the Maravi people, who established a large empire that spanned across current-day Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique (24). As a result, the Chewa people, who are descendants of one of the Maravi clans, live in all three countries. They share a common language and culture and travel among the three countries for social or work engagements. Phiri observes, "When you meet somebody from Zambia, it's like you've met your brother or you've met your sister because we look at ourselves as the same people" (Phiri pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

The Chewa are a matrilineal people. Thus, Phiri's connections to her ancestors can be traced back through her mother, Dorothy Namajengo Kazuwa, and her parents, who lived in central Malawi (Phiri 2020b). Her maternal grandmother, Naphiri Kazuwa, would get up daily at 4 a.m., to pray for her children and grandchildren by name. Phiri recalls learning from her that women pray for their family members (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Her maternal grandfather, Gideon Kazuwa, was an ordained elder and served a church in Lobi, in the Nkhoma Synod, in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), the largest Protestant denomination in Malawi. Isabel was born on November 8, 1957 (Phiri 2020b), in Zambia, where her parents lived briefly. When Isabel was six months old, her parents returned to Malawi and registered Isabel's birth in Lilon-

gwe. A few years later, when she was two, tragedy struck the family. Her biological father died suddenly in a car accident. At the time, Isabel's mother was twenty-four years old and pregnant with her third daughter (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). It was a daunting situation to be a widow with three children, but she could lean on her parents and extended family. According to Phiri, "In a Chewa family, the mother had the privilege, even in marriage, of remaining united with her own kinfolk, and to control, with their kinfolk, the offspring of her marriage" (Phiri 2007b, 36). Dorothy's brother introduced her to a friend, Gershom Migochi, who had been married twice before but had no children. His parents were Reverend Damazeke Malembo, who was a minister in the CCAP, and Janet Nyamwale. Gershom and Dorothy "clicked" and eventually married (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Gershom raised Dorothy's three daughters as his own, giving them his name; this was an important statement of relationship and commitment. Gershom and Dorothy had two more daughters and a son and raised all six children as one family. Isabel was fourteen before she realized that Gershom was not her biological parent. It was a surprising and unsettling revelation. Ultimately, she decided that it did not change things for her. She recalls thinking, "I will not go around looking for a father because I do have a father, you know, this man, even though he did not give birth to us, he has looked after us very well and has never made me feel that I don't belong. So I just said, okay, that's fine. So we stayed still as a team, and up to now, we have still remained as a unit" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Dorothy Migochi valued education and worked hard to ensure all her children could attend good schools. She was employed as a nurse and then later as a secretary at the Reserve Bank of Malawi. She used her earnings to pay school fees for the children. Gershom Migochi was a teacher; his salary covered the expenses for food and basic necessities. It was a "working class kind of a home." Phiri recalls that later she realized it was "a basic life" compared to what others may have had in other countries, but she never felt poor. As a child, she was inspired by her parents' professional example, wanting to be a nurse or secretary like her mother, or a teacher, like her father. In the end, she chose to become a teacher (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Isabel attended a Catholic boarding school, where she focused on Bible studies. She enjoyed school but says, "there was also a spirit of resistance in me towards Catholicism." Isabel attended an Assem-

blies of God church as a young girl, which she enjoyed, but her mother insisted she be baptized as a member of the CCAP. While Isabel's parents themselves were not active church-goers, they still held a strong Presbyterian identity (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Being obedient to her mother's wishes, Isabel was baptized at the Katimba Church in the Blantyre Synod of the CCAP in 1967 (Phiri 2997a, 74). Nevertheless, in 1976, as she was about to begin college, Phiri experienced a spiritual crisis. She struggled with sleeplessness and a lack of enthusiasm for her future. Concerned, her parents sent her to stay with her grandparents in Lobi. Speaking with her grandfather about her spiritual crisis was transformative. He helped her see the difference between knowing facts about Jesus and memorizing Bible verses and having a personal relationship with him. This started her on a deeper spiritual journey, and, two years later, at an evangelical youth conference, she committed her life to Jesus (Phiri personal comm., December 29, 2020).

In 1981, Phiri graduated from Chancellor College with a Bachelor of Education in Religious Studies and History (Phiri, pers. comm. December 29, 2020). She studied with John Parratt, a scholar from England who specialized in Asian and African theology (Parratt 1993, 1995). Phiri particularly loved studying African traditional religions; she recalls that it was eye-opening to realize "that the kinds of things that we do as our culture are also part of our religion" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Phiri also realized that, as an educator in Malawi, she needed to be familiar with religious traditions beyond her own. She grew up with relatives who practiced other faiths, including Gershom Migochi's uncle, who was an imam (Phiri 2015, 8). "I became very interested in all these religions as somebody who is going to train teachers who are going to teach religion in schools, where there is Islam, African traditional religion and Christianity" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).¹

Women were underrepresented in higher education in Malawi, and the university was seeking to hire more women lecturers. After her graduation, Phiri was hired by the Religious Studies Department at Chancellor College on Parratt's recommendation. While serving as a staff associate, she spent a year teaching in a Catholic girls' school to develop her skills. In 1982, she went to Lancaster University in England, where she earned a master's in education, with a focus on religious education and New Testament studies (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Ninian Smart—a pioneer in the field of comparative religion—founded the Theology and Religious Studies De-

partment at Lancaster in 1967. It was the first religion department in a public university in Great Britain. Smart (1996) promoted the academic study of world religions from a secular perspective, rather than a confessional one (Brian Gates, “Ninian Smart”, *Guardian*, February 1, 2001). Phiri studied with Smart and other leading New Testament scholars. Her positive experience in Lancaster gave her insight into the importance of secular religious studies at public universities—an issue she later addressed in South Africa (Phiri and Nadar 2011). Phiri notes that many African women theologians have been educated in secular university settings because they offered fewer barriers to women’s participation (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021). African women were often discouraged from pursuing degrees in theological colleges and seminaries. These settings were focused on training ordained ministers, and few African churches allowed women into the ministry (Phiri 2009, 6).

Early Career

After completing her degree, Phiri returned to Malawi to teach in the Theology Department at Chancellor College. She was appointed lecturer in African theology, New Testament studies, and religious education and stayed in this post from 1983 to 1990. She was active in the academic community and sat on several university committees and boards. She was elected secretary for the Theological Society of Malawi from 1984 to 1986. In 1987, she joined the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion in Malawi* and has remained on the board ever since. She also served for five years as the moderator for Bible knowledge for the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations, becoming chief examiner for Bible knowledge paper 1 in 1989 (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). This was an influential position, as the final secondary school examinations determine if students can attend public or private universities (MANEB, n.d.). All these activities increased Phiri’s visibility as a biblical scholar and educator.

While Phiri’s professional career was growing, she was also raising a family. During her year in England, Isabel met Maxwell Agabu Phiri, a Pentecostal Christian from Zambia, while attending a conference of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Maxwell had recently completed a diploma in journalism and was in England studying radio broadcast-

ing (UKZN, n.d.). The two representatives became very close, drawn together by their faith, and were married at the Lilongwe Pentecostal Church in Malawi on December 21, 1985 (Phiri 2020b). In 1988, she gave birth to their son, Chisomo. His arrival was the answer to prayers, as Phiri had medical issues that made getting pregnant difficult. Wanting a larger family, the Phiris later adopted two children from relatives: Kuleza (born 1989) and Cynthia (born 1990) (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). The marriage between Isabel and Maxwell has been a mutually supportive one, and she credits her husband for helping to shape her into the person she has become. She says, “We were willing to grow together, support and inspire each other to grow to our fullest potential” (Phiri 2020b, 2). The couple prays regularly and consults each other on major decisions (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). They both pursued academic careers. In an interview with journalist Lucia Cuocci for the Italian radio program *Protestantesimo* on Rai 2, Phiri noted, “For us it’s been ‘iron sharpening iron’ in every area of our lives. . . . Academically we have inspired each other to grow to the extent that we are now both professors” (Phiri 2020b, 2).²

In addition to the support of her husband, Phiri was also fortunate to have two important African mentors who helped expand her horizons. One was John Pobee, the distinguished Ghanaian New Testament scholar, educator, and ecumenist. In 1984, Pobee became associate director for Africa for the World Council of Churches’ Programme on Theological Education (PTE). The PTE led ecumenical efforts to promote contextually relevant theological education in different regions of the world, a major focus of the WCC’s educational work at the time (Pobee 2009, 149). Pobee was an influential figure in shaping the direction of theological education in Africa and was particularly supportive of African women theologians (Phiri 2009, 11). He met Phiri at a WCC-sponsored conference for religious educators in Malawi and invited her to join the PTE as a Youth Commissioner. This opportunity introduced Phiri to global conversations about the purpose and nature of theological education. At first, the language and concepts being discussed were so unfamiliar that she found the experience bewildering and intimidating. She recalls that, at her first meeting with other theological educators at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland, it all seemed so incomprehensible she wanted to quit. Pobee urged her to stay, assuring her that she belonged and would come to feel more comfortable with time. She persevered and came to appreciate the work of the PTE, which

“spoke to her heart.” She served for six years as a commissioner, from 1984 to 1990 (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021) and would remain connected to the WCC in various ways over the years.

John Pobee introduced Phiri to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, another significant influence on her life (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). From 1987 to 1993, Oduyoye was the deputy general secretary of the WCC, the first woman from Sub-Saharan Africa to hold such a high-level position in the ecumenical movement (Kanyoro 2002, 18). She was one of the first women in Africa to have an advanced degree in theology and was a pioneering figure in the development of African women’s theology. Her books *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (1995) and *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (2001) are now classics (Oredein 2020). Her own experience of being marginalized as an African woman in the field of theology led her to found the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Oduyoye 2009). Phiri credits Oduyoye with teaching her “how to be a woman and how to be a Christian and how to be an academic in the African context” (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Phiri attended the historic convocation in Ghana at which the Circle was launched in 1989. It turned out to be a watershed moment in her life (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Over seventy African women theologians from across the continent and the diaspora gathered in September 1989 at Trinity College in Accra, Ghana, for a week of storytelling, reflection, and organizing (Kanyoro and Oduyoye 1990). Phiri attended as a representative of the WCC’s Program on Theological Education (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020) and led one of the plenary sessions (Kanyoro and Oduyoye 1990, 234). Mercy Oduyoye articulated the need for a “two-winged approach” (25), affirming the importance of including African women’s perspectives in theological discourse in Africa. These discussions inspired Phiri greatly. She realized that she could be concerned about gender justice and be a faithful Christian at the same time and that these two stances were not in opposition. She had never heard this affirmed before. This experience empowered her to explore gender, culture, and religion in her research and writing (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021).

In 1990, Phiri began PhD studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. She moved with her young son Chisomo and her husband Maxwell, who began a degree program in industrial sociology. She had been offered a Commonwealth scholarship to study at Leeds University, but she was encouraged by John Pobee to stay in Africa

(Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). She received a scholarship from the WCC that made her studies possible. Phiri arrived at a time of great change in the country, as Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the apartheid system was being dismantled. It proved to be a profoundly influential time in her life. Her studies exposed her to new methodologies as she learned “how to use the frameworks of feminist theology, ecumenism, and African theology to resist racism and sexism” (Phiri 2020a, 67). She was supervised by John W. de Gruchy, professor of Christian studies, who taught political theology and was a co-signer of the Kairos document (Kairos Theologians 1986, 54). Phiri also studied with Gabriel Molehe Setiloane, one of the pioneers of African theology. Setiloane’s famous poem, “I am an African,” is included in the *Handbook on Theological Education in Africa* (Phiri and Werner 2013, v). As Phiri was interested in gender and religion, De Gruchy encouraged her to study with Denise Ackerman, a White feminist theologian who was also completing her PhD at the University of South Africa (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). In Malawi, religion and politics were kept separate, but, in South Africa, the two were in constant dialogue. Phiri embraced this approach.

I learned that theological reflection goes hand in hand with activism and the importance of taking an intersectionality approach in the fight against social injustice. This means that when a theologian is in the context of struggle for social justice, being prophetic also means being involved in activism. (Phiri 2020a, 67)

In parallel with her studies, Phiri started a local chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Cape Town. Ackerman, the more senior of the two women, went on to lead the group. This was the first of four local chapters of the Circle that Phiri would found (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Phiri’s interest in the intersection of religion, culture, and gender was reflected in her PhD research. She wrote her thesis on “African Women in Religion and Culture: Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: A Critical Study from Women’s Perspective.” She researched ritual practices at rain shrines in the indigenous Chewa tradition and the role women served as spiritual leaders. She then looked at how Christian traditions impacted women in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian and in what ways these improved women’s lives or served to marginalize them. An edited version was published in 1997 as *Women, Pres-*

byterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi. It was the first book to be published in Africa that offered a systematic analysis of gender, culture, and religion within an African religious tradition (Phiri 2007b, 6). In 1998, it received honorable mention in the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, as announced in the *Nation* newspaper (Dr. Illieva, “The Spirit of the Noma Award Thrives,” November 22, 1998).

Women’s Rights in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian

After earning her PhD in 1992 (University of Cape Town n.d.), Phiri returned to her role as lecturer at Chancellor College in Malawi (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Her return coincided with major political changes within Malawi, as the country transitioned from single-party rule to a multi-party democracy (Ross 2007, 260). These same years also coincided with the World Council of Churches’ Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Globally and regionally, churches organized activities to highlight the needs of women in church and in society (Manzanan et al. 1990; Phiri and Kaunda 2017, 388).

These movements sparked interest in Malawi around women’s issues. In November 1994, a group of women church workers from Blantyre Synod, CCAP, decided to speak out publicly about their concerns. These included ordination of women to the diaconate and ministry but also encompassed issues such as violence against women, unequal salaries, lack of involvement of women in the decision making of the church, and marginalization of unmarried women in the church. A petition was developed to be presented to church leaders (Phiri 2007a, 83), and Phiri helped them shape the final document. Due to health reasons, she was not with the women when they marched to present the document to a gathering of synod and presbytery administrators. However, she would have liked to be there in support (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

The all-male church leadership was angered by the women’s public march and presentation of the petition, and there was an immediate backlash. Church workers who had participated in the march were suspended. A commission of inquiry was established to investi-

gate the situation, which led to additional reprisals. Women's work in the synod was reorganized to put male clergy in charge (Phiri 2007a, 86). The commission also recommended that Phiri be asked to leave the Blantyre Synod and transfer to the Nkhoma Synod (85).

In response, Phiri wrote a letter challenging the synod leaders' right to dictate where she should hold church membership. She was baptized in the Blantyre Synod and was a member in good standing; they could not require her to leave. She also critiqued the way the commission of inquiry handled the situation, noting that the women's legitimate concerns had not been addressed (91). Through her global connections, Phiri was able to bring international attention to the situation. She sent a copy of her letter to the World Alliance for Reformed Churches (WARC), the global communion for all Reformed churches, of which the CCAP was a part (87). Under pressure, the Blantyre Synod leaders agreed to meetings facilitated by WARC representatives. Phiri notes, "They helped us come together and there was reconciliation. We apologized to each other and then this commission report was withdrawn" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

The outcome was to move the needle forward on women's participation in the CCAP. When the next election was held for general secretary for the CCAP, women were given the right to vote for the first time. They helped elect a new general secretary, Rev. Dr. Silas Nchozana, who was "gender sensitive, the one who had sided with the women when they marched" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Phiri sees this as a significant moment in the history of the CCAP, stating, "that was a breakthrough, and it was a breakthrough because we had the international support" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Gender-based Violence at Chancellor College

That same year, Phiri also learned about a profoundly upsetting situation on the campus of Chancellor College. As she had in Cape Town, Phiri had created a local chapter of the Circle in Malawi when she returned in 1993 (Fiedler 2017, 77). The group met on the campus and included women outside the field of theology interested in gender studies. At the meetings, students began to share their experience of gender-based violence on campus. As one example of the pervasive

climate of harassment at the time, women students who wanted to enter the library were being subjected to fondling as “admission” to the library (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Outraged by the situation, Phiri decided to leverage her position as a faculty member to address the issue directly. She was joined by three female faculty colleagues: Linda Semu, a sociologist, Flora Nankhuni, an economist, and Nyovani Madise Chikusa, a statistician (Phiri 2007a, 101). They proposed a research study on gender-based violence on the campus, which the university approved. The research findings revealed there was a widespread problem. Data from the anonymous survey of over 300 women students on campus revealed that 12.6% of the women students reported being raped, and 67% had experienced sexual harassment. It also showed that the students were reluctant to come forward about their experience. Two-thirds of the rape survivors did not report the rape (101–2). Although there were four authors, Phiri was the one who presented the paper, “Violence Against Women in Educational Institutions: The Case of Sexual Harassment and Rape on Chancellor College Campus.” She presented on July 19, 1995, at a University conference (101).

The paper was the first of its kind in Malawi, and the findings immediately made national headlines. As the presenter, Phiri was interviewed on the radio the following day (102). Suddenly the university became the focus of national media attention, much of which conflated the actual statistics and reported that 67% of women students had been raped. The reaction on campus was intensely negative. Male lecturers were angry at being accused of sexual violence, and students felt their reputations were being ruined. On campus, students rioted (103). Even some women who had participated in the study, and whose experience had informed the study’s findings, participated in the riots. They were angry at the study’s public exposure of the situation. Discussing gender-based violence was taboo, and could lead to stigmatization and ostracization for survivors (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

As Phiri was the presenter of the study and had been interviewed on the radio, she became the focal point for the students’ rage. While Phiri was still at the conference, a student mob gathered outside the house where she lived, which was on the edge of campus. Phiri’s son, nephew, and mother were home at the time. The mob started throwing stones, breaking windows, and destroying the family car (Phiri 2007a, 103). Students threatened to rape Phiri and kill her son and vowed to return with petrol to burn down the house. It was an in-

tensely traumatic experience for Phiri's son. Phiri was notified of the attack while at the conference, which was two hours away. When she arrived home, she urged the university to protect herself and her family. They were housed at a hotel for a night for safety and later moved to a new home (Phiri, pers. comm, December 29, 2020).

For weeks, the students refused to take exams unless Phiri was punished. The college administration blamed Phiri for the disruption and discussed setting up a disciplinary committee. However, Phiri made the case that the four researchers were given permission to conduct the survey, and all correct procedures were followed. She eventually hired a lawyer to protect herself (Phiri 2007a, 113). In the end, due to an infrastructure issue, students were sent home without taking exams (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Phiri's whole family faced hostility from the community. Chisomo, her son, endured tensions at school and was worried that his mother would be harmed. Deeply concerned about the impact on her son, Phiri began to look for work elsewhere. The head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies was supportive of her throughout the ordeal (Phiri 2007a, 106–8), and the vice-chancellor of the University of Malawi urged her to return when the university reopened in January 1996. She reluctantly agreed. During these turbulent months, she left home early in the morning to conduct field research about women healers in African Indigenous churches. At home, she focused on her writing, not daring to leave the house (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

A change came when, at the end of 1995, the *Nation*—a national newspaper in Malawi—announced their annual “Woman of the Year,” chosen by readers of the newspaper. The award was given to Phiri for her work addressing gender-based violence on campus. She notes that this marked a sea-change in attitudes on campus, and hostility ebbed. As a result of the public scrutiny, international donors had pressured the University to address the violence and harassment (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Discussions began in 1996 to establish a Center for Gender Studies, which was launched in 1999 and continues today. According to the website, its mission is to “enhance the understanding of gender issues in Malawi and effect attitudinal and behavioural change, with the view of creating a more open society in which men and women are equal partners, participants and beneficiaries of development” (University of Malawi, n.d.).

When reflecting on this period in her life, Phiri focuses on the positive changes that occurred because of the attention brought to women's issues:

I felt that, although I went through a difficult time, a traumatic time, there were substantial changes happening in Malawi. Substantial changes that shifted the conversation in the country on gender issues. So for me, when I look at my life and say, what have I achieved the most? It's that one, that the conversation became a national conversation and the church shifted and the university shifted as well. But I still left the country. (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020)

Phiri notes that the three other women who had co-authored the report also left the country. Semu and Nankhuni moved to the USA. Chikusa moved to the United Kingdom (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

In recognition of her situation, the university allowed Phiri to take a sabbatical (Phiri 2007a, 117). She taught as a senior lecturer in African theology at the University of Namibia from May 1996 to August 1997. While there, she started a local chapter of the Circle, composed largely of women from the Lutheran Church (Kanyoro 1997). The sabbatical was good for Phiri, providing her with a time of healing and rest after a traumatic year (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

South Africa

At the end of her sabbatical, Phiri did not return to Malawi. Instead, she moved to South Africa in August 1997 to begin teaching as an associate professor in theological studies at the School of Religion and Culture at the University of Durban Westville, in Durban. This was the beginning of a time of great academic flourishing and growth for her. She would stay in South Africa for the next fifteen years, gaining recognition as a professor and researcher. She started two chapters of the Circle, one in Durban (Fiedler 2017, 72) and another in Pietermaritzburg (75). In 2001, Phiri started teaching at the University of Natal, and, in 2003, she was made a full professor. In 2004, the University of Durban Westville, a predominantly Indian university, merged with Natal University, a predominantly White university, becoming

the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN, n.d.a). The following year, in 2005, Phiri became head of the School of Religion and Theology at the university. She served in this role until 2007, and, in 2012, she became dean (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

One significant aspect of her time in South Africa was her work with the Centre for Constructive Theology (CCT). Launched in 1996, CCT was an initiative of the University of Durban-Westville, “to bridge the gap between formal academic theological enquiries and the practical needs and concerns of the community” (Phiri 2000, 330). The program aimed to meet the needs of underserved communities, particularly rural, poor, Black women who had been multiply oppressed by class, race, and gender under apartheid (Balia 1996, 230). Phiri was the coordinator for the Women in the Church and Society program and also director of the Centre, serving in this role from 1997 to 2012. She was also senior editor for the *Journal of Constructive Theology* from 1997 to 2010. Under her leadership, the journal began to focus on gender and religion; it was renamed the *Journal of Gender Religion and Theology in Africa* in 2014 (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

In her work at CCT, Phiri prioritized the empowerment of women through education, believing that “knowledge is power” (Phiri 2000, 336). One innovative program focused on the educational needs of charismatic leaders in African Initiated Churches (AIC), many of whom are women. CCT established a biblical studies program in the rural areas for AIC leaders, who often do not have formal biblical or theological training. The pastors would study a biblical text in class and then preach on it in their church. They did not need to know how to read or write to participate in the program, which used oral teaching methods and allowed students to take exams by recording their answers verbally. This allowed people to participate who had little schooling—a significant issue in a country with a brutally unequal education system under apartheid (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021).

As a professor, Phiri also made a significant contribution to the study of religion in South Africa by establishing a gender and religion program at the School of Theology and Religion at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, a project Phiri spearheaded with her colleague Sarojini Nadar. By insisting on religion as the focus, rather than theology, Phiri made space to discuss women’s experience in traditional African religions and other under-studied traditions. Furthermore, Phiri understood that gender justice was not only about the experi-

ence of women. This opened space in the program for discussions of masculinity and issues surrounding transgender and non-binary gender identity. It also allowed for the discussion of sexuality (Phiri and Kaunda 2017). Today, the program intentionally includes LGBTQI+ perspectives, a direction that Phiri supports (Gerald West, pers. comm., May 7, 2021).

As a professor, Phiri taught classes on African women's theology, African Instituted Churches, and theology in the African context. At times, it was an "uphill battle" to get new students to see the value in reading African women's theology or discussing topics related to gender. She received pushback from some male students who refused to respect her authority as a professor. She notes, however, that these students were often transformed by their studies. In one case, a student who had been disrespectful to her at orientation came back later to apologize. Other students have sought her advice after graduation. "They go into the field, and they meet the challenges there, and they write back to you and say, 'This is what I'm going through now, please give me advice. How can I handle this issue?' Or 'Please come Monday, I need my students to see somebody like you, to see that there are women out there who are teaching these things'" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Former students have described her as being very humble, as well as a calm, kind, and supportive mentor (Kaunda 2021a, 4–7). Chammah Kaunda observes that she "always believed that sustainable wellbeing of African theological scholarship and the African continent lies in mentoring and nurturing the next generation" (9).

Phiri also served as theological editor and a member of the advisory committee for the African Bible Commentary Project from 2001 to 2005. Contributors were intentional in writing "in familiar language, using colloquial metaphors, African thought-forms and nuances, and practical applications that fit the African context" (Adeyemo 2006, viii). Phiri wrote the commentary on Ruth, drawing out many themes that connect to African women's experience and including proverbs in the Chewa language to help underscore the story's message (319–24). She also contributed articles on "Polygamy" (429) and "Weddings and Lobola" (799), highlighting both biblical examples and the contemporary situation in Africa. In her article on "Rape" (393), she writes, "Silence encourages rape, and so the church needs to break its silence by preaching constantly against the abuse of women and children." The inclusion of these articles, with their

frank examination on sensitive topics, reveals how Phiri continued to center women's perspectives in her work.

Phiri's appointment in 2005 as head of the School of Religion and Theology, now the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal was a significant milestone. African women were, and continue to be, underrepresented on the faculties of African universities and, even more so, as administrative heads (Doerrer 2015). Phiri broke new ground as a Black African woman leading a school of religion and theology—one of the best in the country—in the post-liberation period of South Africa. Her academic credentials and publishing record were impressive, and her appointment was well-received (West, pers. comm., May 7, 2021). Placing a non-South African at the head of the school was significant as well. As a Malawian, Phiri was seen as an outsider, which was sometimes a disadvantage within the politics of a South African university. However, it also helped her to play a neutral role as the school's head in light of the tense racial history of South African tertiary education (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Phiri's growth and success as an academic were intimately connected to her active participation in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. As has been noted, Phiri founded a local circle chapter everywhere she lived. The Durban Circle was particularly successful and, at one point, had two hundred members (Fiedler 2017, 72). In these local chapters, women gathered to reflect theologically on their lived experience, select research topics relevant to their context, and empower each other to publish (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). While many of the participants are Christians, the Circle is open to women from all religions (Phiri 2009, 106). Phiri was a mentor to many women, supporting their research and writing efforts and providing opportunities for collaboration. She was also supportive of male scholars who were writing on gender; Gerald West, her colleague from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal recalls her generosity in inviting him to present a paper on transforming masculinity at the Cameroon continental Circle gathering in 2007 (West, pers. comm., May 7, 2021).

Phiri was prolific in her research, writing, and editing efforts. Her field research on *sangomas*, or female traditional healers, is particularly notable. It examines Indigenous women's spiritual practices—a topic not well covered in religious studies (Phiri 2005a; Phiri and Nadar 2009). She was sensitive to the fact that, in Western scholarship, many traditional practices, like spiritual healing, have been viewed as “primitive” and practitioners treated as objects. In her research, conducted with Sarojini Nadar and others, Phiri used collaborative and participatory methods. In one study, Phiri and Nadar invited healers to share proverbs and songs related to marriage and sexuality and analyzed how these oral traditions function as a model for knowledge production (Phiri and Nadar 2009). The study is a good example of how Phiri's research choices were informed by her participation in the Circle and its approach to theology.

In addition, Phiri has made notable contributions as an editor. With Sarojini Nadar, she edited a series of essays in honor of Mercy Oduyoye, entitled *African Women, Religion and Health* (2006). This volume was awarded the 2006 University of KwaZulu Natal book prize for an edited book and the 2007 Catholic Press Association award for a book on gender (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). As co-chairs of the Circle's Commission on Women's History and Biographies, Sarojini Nadar and Phiri also co-edited, with Devarakshnam Betty Govinden, a book entitled *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women in Africa* (2002). *Her-Stories* was intended to “complement African church history” (4) and to “revise and retell our stories from women's perspectives” (6). The editors observe that such storytelling has an impact on the whole community. “We believe telling our stories shifts women from being observers and victims into participants and actors. The growing community of writers expands into a community of readers. When other sisters read our stories, they, in turn, are gathered in the winnowing process. They are inspired to look at their own lives and evaluate their own experiences and, hopefully, tell their stories” (7). The telling of the stories is not always easy, as they include painful moments of suffering or exclusion. But the stories also affirm African women's strength, wisdom, and courage.

Phiri also made a tremendous contribution to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians through her leadership as the general coordinator from 2002 to 2007. In this role, she took on responsibilities for organizing the Circle at the continental level. She leveraged institutional support through the Center for Constructive Theology and directed field research on topics related to the Circle's

priorities. Donors who knew her work at CCT offered financial support. A newsletter was published highlighting regional activities, and Phiri visited the national circles to encourage their work and make connections between regions (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021). Under her skillful management, the Circle was highly productive, publishing more books than in any other period (West, pers. comm., May 7, 2021).

At the same time, the Circle selected HIV and AIDS as its five-year research focus (Phiri 2010). Biblical scholar Musa Dube (2002) was the most prominent Circle leader in this effort (Browning 2012, 136; Njoroge 2012, 132). Phiri contributed four liturgies to a resource that Dube (2003) edited, entitled *Africa Praying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy* (e.g., “Hope: Do Not Fear; Only Believe,” 110–15), published by the WCC. She also represented the Circle in the annual meetings of the WCC’s Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa from 2002 to 2009 (Phiri, pers. comm., February 4, 2021). Phiri challenged churches to re-examine theological frameworks that considered the illness to be punishment for sin. In “HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission,” Phiri writes, “The way forward for all the theologies of Africa is to unite and take the current context of HIV/AIDS into theological reflection. . . . What is required from the church, the body of Christ, is commitment to fight against the spread of the disease with all available resources. Presenting a God of compassion rather than a God of wrath is central when dealing with the infected and affected” (2010, 226). The work by Circle theologians in this period was tremendously influential in mainstreaming discussions on HIV and AIDS in theological education and churches. It made a significant contribution to changing attitudes towards people affected and infected by HIV (Nadar and Phiri 2012). Phiri’s writing on HIV and AIDS also addressed related issues such as human sexuality, violence against women, and the importance of mutual, respectful relationships between husbands and wives (Fiedler 2021, 38). Her writings have promoted women’s health and wellbeing as central theological concerns (Kaunda 2021b, 23, 234).

However, the emphasis on writing and publishing, which Phiri embraced, also sparked controversy within the wider Circle. At the 2007 continental gathering in Cameroon, critics said that the Circle had become dominated by elites—those who taught in universities and had advanced degrees. There was a call to make the Circle more accessible to women outside of the academy. There was dissension

about the goals of the Circle in the coming years and the best way forward. Phiri recalls that she and other older Circle members left the meeting feeling wounded. After stepping down from the role of general coordinator, Phiri withdrew for a time from Circle activities, although she remained involved at the local level. She acknowledges that there wasn't a very effective transfer of leadership between herself and the new general coordinator, Fulata Lusungu Moyo. Moyo, who was also from Malawi, was working as the women's coordinator for the WCC at the time (Fiedler 2017, 44). In retrospect, Phiri can see how the withdrawal of senior members of the Circle left the new coordinator without their support in the daunting task of managing a continental network. Lack of institutional support presented challenges, as did lack of funding when expected support from the WCC did not materialize and donors fell off. Yet regional chapters continued to meet. In 2018, Musa Dube became the new general coordinator and is working to bring new vitality to the Continental Circle. The new focus for theological reflection is climate justice (Phiri, pers. comm, January 5, 2021).

Ecumenical Theological Education

Phiri's contributions to ecumenical discussions of theological education are also significant. As mentioned above, she served a six-year term as a commissioner for the Programme on Theological Education, which concluded in 1990. Phiri later served on the advisory board for the Bossey Ecumenical Institute from 2004 to 2005 and was the moderator of the WCC's Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation from 2006 to 2009 (Phiri, pers. comm., February 4, 2021). Today, she is part of the Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN), launched in 2015. Coordinated by the Ecumenical Theological Education program, PAWEEN was created to be "a platform of academic study, spiritual reflection and action for women of African descent in all regions of the world" (Phiri 2019). In all these settings, Phiri continues to advocate for transformative theological education that contributes to the well-being of the whole people of God.

One primary focus of the WCC's work in theological education has been encouraging the development of contextual theological education, "liberating theological education from any captivity of cer-

tain social milieus, cultural one-sidedness and spiritual blindness to religious values existing in certain indigenous traditions” (WCC 2008, 390). Recently, Phiri undertook two major projects related to contextual education with Dietrich Werner, program executive for ecumenical theological education. The first was the *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa* (2013). This textbook includes an impressive array of articles written primarily by African scholars. Phiri advocated for printing it in Africa to ensure the handbook was affordable and could be widely distributed to academic institutions (West, pers. comm., May 7, 2021). Similarly, Phiri and Werner were the two senior editors for the *Anthology of African Christianity*, which addresses the need for a comprehensive resource to provide an “accurate introduction on the current shape of African Christianity and the role of its different forms and trends for social and political development on the continent” (Phiri et al. 2016, xxxviii). Phiri’s participation in these two projects reflects her desire to see that theological institutions in Africa have contextually relevant content, written by African scholars, to prepare students to engage effectively in the world (Phiri 2016, 10).

Public Witness and Diakonia

In 2012, after a time of discernment, Phiri accepted the position of associate general secretary for public witness and diakonia for the World Council of Churches and moved to Switzerland (WCC News, “Isabel Apawo Phiri Joins WCC as New Associate General Secretary,” August 17, 2012, www.oikoumene.org/news). In January 2017, she became deputy general secretary, the first African woman since Mercy Oduyoye to hold this senior title at the WCC (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Public Witness and Diakonia is one of three main program areas for the WCC and encompasses initiatives that respond to the needs of people in the world. Phiri describes diakonia as “the churches’ embodiment of God’s reign to come, with its promise of life, justice, and peace and God’s preferential option for the poor as theological and ethical criteria for the way forward” (Phiri 2019, 482–3). The larger framework for her work is the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (Phiri 2020a, 62), a theme set at the 10th WCC Assembly in Busan, South Korea, in 2013 (WCC Central Committee, “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,” July 8, 2014, www.oikoumene.org/news).

[org/resources/documents](#)). Initiatives she oversees include: the Ecumenical United Nations Office, Ecumenical Water Network, Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy, Food for Life Campaign, and the WCC-Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. Her mandate includes peace-building, health and healing, human rights, economic justice, sustainability, climate justice, and anti-racism efforts (WCC n.d.a.).

Phiri's work with the WCC can be seen as an extension of her work within the church and the academy, where she also fostered deep connections between faith and social justice. Her background as a scholar helps to ground her work in biblical and theological reflection and is consistent with the WCC's emphasis on theology as an underpinning of its public witness. However, for Phiri, reflection is not enough; faith requires action. "Being an ecumenical church requires of us to share together our spirituality and to act together. It is these two which make the presence of Jesus Christ visible among us and in our witness in the world credible" (Phiri 2015, 5).

Leading the public witness and diakonia efforts for a global fellowship of 350-member churches is no easy task. Phiri approaches her ecumenical work with the same inclusive and collaborative approach she had as an academic and member of the Circle. She believes in the transformational power of personal narrative and sees listening as essential to public witness and diakonia (Phiri 2020a, 71). Increasingly, the issues dividing the WCC member churches are less about denominational issues and more about "divisions within churches over exclusion and discrimination on the basis of race, caste, gender, HIV and AIDS, and sexual orientation" (Phiri 2015, 10). Having herself experienced marginalization, she feels called to be in solidarity with others in the church who are seeking full inclusion, including LGBTQI+ members (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021). She also feels that the work for justice and peace should be inclusive of people from other faiths. "The church is called to raise its prophetic voice to advocate for people suffering from inequality irrespective of their religious affiliation, race or caste, class . . . [A]ll are children of God deserving of being reached with God's love" (Phiri 2015).

One area that is difficult to discuss in ecumenical and interfaith settings is the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Phiri experienced firsthand the tensions between the WCC and the Israeli government over the WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine (EAPPI). Established in 2002, EAPPI sends international delegations to accompany Palestinians in the occupied territories to offer "a protective presence" and witness "their daily

struggles and hopes” (WCC n.d.b.). The EAPPI program and the WCC have been criticized for being partisan in the conflict and unfairly critical of Israel (Adam Beckett, “EAPPI is Not Anti-Semitic, WCC Insists,” *Church Times*, February 15, 2019). In December 2016, Phiri was denied entry to Israel when traveling to Jerusalem to meet with leaders of the EAPPI program, which she oversees. She was part of a delegation of four representatives from the WCC, including Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, the general secretary. None of the other leaders were stopped while entering the country. Arriving separately, Phiri was detained, questioned by immigration and security personnel, and then sent back to Geneva (Ilan Lior, “In First, Israel Denies Entry to Religious Official Citing Support for BDS Movement,” *Haaretz*, December 6, 2016).

Initially, Phiri was told she was being refused entry for immigration reasons. Later, Israeli officials described her as an activist for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, known as BDS. They cited this as the reason she was deported, making Phiri the first person to be denied entry to Israel for being a BDS supporter (Peter Beaumont, “Israel Refuses Visa to Theologian over Boycott and Divestment Activism,” *Guardian*, December 6, 2016). BDS is an international movement, initiated by Palestinians, that encourages the use of economic measures to put pressure on Israel. Supporters see it as a non-violent movement for justice, and critics consider it to be antisemitic (David M. Halbfinger, Michael Wines, and Steven Erlanger, “Is B.D.S. Anti-Semitic? A Closer Look at the Boycott Israel Campaign,” July 27, 2019, *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com). Phiri was surprised to see herself described as a BDS activist in the press and noted that she was never asked directly about the BDS movement in questioning. As a staff member, she speaks on behalf of the WCC, not as an individual (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). When asked, she explained the WCC policy on Israel-Palestine (WCC 2017) to officials. She also explained she does not oversee the daily running of the EAPPI program (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). The WCC hired a lawyer to contest the denial. After two years of legal challenges, a judge ruled in Phiri’s favor (*WCC News*, “Court Orders Reversal on Israeli Ban of WCC Deputy General Secretary,” October 18, 2018, www.oikoumene.org). The Israeli government said she would be allowed to return to Israel on the condition that she agrees to sign a paper saying she would not meet with any supporters of BDS on future trips. WCC lawyers advised against signing such a declaration, as it would require her to know everyone’s political views on BDS at every meet-

ing. She declined to sign the required form and has not been able to visit Israel since 2016. Phiri is pragmatic about the outcome, recognizing that other staff can continue the work in the region, and she has many other partners to visit (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). Nevertheless, the incident highlights the challenges of leading justice work for the WCC, which represents so many constituencies and involves complex relationships internally and externally.

In 2018, Phiri traveled to Kingston, Jamaica, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. In an interview afterward, Phiri noted that much has changed as a result of the Decade. Four of the WCC presidents are women, as well as the moderator of the central committee, Dr. Agnes Abuom, who is from Kenya. Yet, there is also “global backlash against the forward strides that have been made in recent decades on issues of gender justice in the church and the world” (Phiri 2018). Phiri believes that gender justice is essential work for the ecumenical movement, and she continues to highlight the ways this interrelates with other urgent issues. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, women were disproportionately affected yet were severely under-represented in news coverage. “Churches and ecumenical organisations have a role to play” in addressing this problem, says Phiri, “by promoting and supporting women’s leadership and calling on media to stop perpetuating gender stereotypes and the marginalization of women especially in vulnerable populations” (*WCC News*, “Gender Justice in Media Coverage: Are We Making Progress?” March 8, 2021, www.oikoumene.org/news). Her leadership on these matters helps keep gender justice centered in all aspects of the WCC’s public witness and diakonia.

Return to Malawi

In 2022, after the next WCC Assembly, Isabel Apawo Phiri will retire and return to Malawi, where she hopes to live on a farm. She is looking forward to reuniting with her husband. When she first moved to Geneva, Maxwell came with her on sabbatical leave but eventually returned to South Africa (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020). He currently teaches business administration at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN, n.d.b). Being separated has not been easy, although Phiri’s work takes her to Africa regularly, and

Maxwell travels often to Geneva. Phiri also looks forward to being close to her children and her first grandchild—Chisomo’s daughter, Eliana Isabella Thandeka—who was born in 2015 (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).

Phiri is well-respected in Malawi and will be welcomed home with pride. When she visits the continent, she makes it a point to visit theological schools to meet with students. She knows she is a role model as an African woman who holds a senior leadership role in the church. She finds it encouraging to hear students say that they have read her books or those of other African women theologians (Phiri, pers. comm., January 5, 2021). A new generation of African women is coming of age, ready to take their own first steps toward leadership roles in the church and society. As they do, they will have Phiri’s example to follow.

Conclusion

In reviewing Phiri’s work, one sees her longstanding commitment to listen to the voices of women in Africa, particularly those who are not a part of the academy, and to offer theological education that meets them where they are. Speaking of her work at the Center for Constructive Theology, Phiri writes, “One of the methodologies used is telling the story of one’s own experience or those of other women whom we know, and who have given us permission to share their experience in order to empower other women” (Phiri 2000, 331). She recognizes song, parable, and storytelling as valid mediums for theological discourse. She asserts the right of African women to write about their experiences, to create theological discourses, and to have a seat at the table in the academy and church. She rejects those academic discourses which treat African women as objects to be discussed at a distance. She advocates for theological education that is contextually appropriate and sensitive to the real-world settings in which women and men live. She urges churches to be faithful to the witness of Christ by living an engaged life, connecting theological concerns with the hard work of addressing inequity and social injustice.

Phiri’s work highlights the continuing need to examine theological education to see how it can be more receptive to the varieties of lived experience of Christians around the globe. Her work points

the way to a sensitive and respectful engagement with women who are not in the academy but who represent the majority of faithful practitioners of Christianity. Furthermore, she challenges theological educators and scholars of religion to be receptive to the continuing importance of engendering theological discourse. As Angelique Walker-Smith and Amélie Adamavi-Aho Ekué (2020, 407) have noted, “the pioneering generation of Pan-African female ecumenists has particular stories to tell, propitious for supporting emerging theologians of today in their search for a meaningful place in the fellowship of churches.” They also note that today’s context for theological education “calls also for a deepened reflection on how theological education is undertaken, and not only on what theological education seeks to transmit” (410). They argue that “The decisive quality in theological education will consist in an adequate form of relating to different, contextually framed layers of history in theology, and how to make sense of these in the face of multifaceted interrogations, situations, and attitudes in and outside the churches and theological institutions” (410).

Phiri’s work provides an essential contribution to this discourse. Her life story and contributions are important to the history of theological education in Africa and should inform reflections on that history. Her work also holds lessons for all those seeking to reflect deeply on how we undertake contextual theological education and how this work connects to justice issues. In the conclusion to a volume of essays published in Phiri’s honor, Chammah J. Kaunda and Julius M. Gathogo note that her work is grounded in “a theology that has a broad spectrum that sees the wellbeing of the Other as a critical component of being a theologian in postcolonial Africa. This ‘Other’ may mean a neighbor, the other gender, the ecumenical other, the racial-ethnic divide, the international divides, diverse cultures, and so on” (205). It is this concern for the wellbeing of all that motivates Phiri’s work as a scholar-activist.

Finally, Phiri’s tireless efforts to engender theological education suggest ways that we might advocate for greater knowledge equity in the digital age. This should include expanding access to African women’s theological writings in open source platforms and digital repositories and digital sites like Wikipedia. As Musa Dube (2000, 20) notes in her work *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Western imperialism embedded in theological and religious studies has created “unequal geographies, unequal races, unequal distribution of power, and silencing of women.” Decolonizing theological education

requires confronting the ways African women have been marginalized by Western scholarship, either treated as curious objects to be studied with condescension or simply overlooked completely. A lack of engagement with African women's perspectives in the academy becomes amplified in the emerging field of digital humanities when content about African women theologians is missing from digital repositories or sites like Wikipedia and Wikidata. The history of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the contribution of many of its leading members, including Isabel Apawo Phiri, merit greater attention in these spaces. There is much more work to be done to address the content gaps that obscure African women's voices and to bring equity to digital spaces. Yet this work is essential for the 21st century and beyond.

Works Cited

- Adamavi-Aho Ekué, Amélé and Angelique Walker-Smith. 2019. "Pan-African Women of Faith and a Vision of Inclusive Global Theological Education." *Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 4: 405–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12448>.
- Adeyemo, Tokunboh, ed. 2006. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publisher.
- Balia, Daryl M. 1996. "Doing Constructive Theology in South Africa Today: A Faculty Initiative." *Mission Studies* 13, nos. 1 & 2: 229–34. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157338396X00122>.
- Browning, Melissa. 2012. "Listening to the Particular through Action Research on HIV and AIDS." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2: 133–7.
- Doerrer, Sarah. 2015. "Gender Equity Requires Higher Education Equity: A Discussion with African Women about the Barriers They Face to Participation as Students, Faculty, and in Academic Leadership." *Planning and Changing* 46, nos. 3 & 4: 294–310.
- Dube, Musa. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.

- . 2002. “Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era.” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 363: 535–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2002.tb00366.x>.
- , ed. 2003. *Africa Praying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Geneva: WCC Publications. Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/africa-praying-eng.pdf>.
- Fiedler, Rachel NyaGondwe. 2017. *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007*. Oxford: African Books Collective.
- . 2021. “The Transferability of Selected Theologies of Isabel Apawo Phiri on HIV and AIDS Prevention and Care to Christian Women in Southern Malawi.” In *Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*, edited by Chammah J. Kaunda, 17–30. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- Gathogo, Julius M. and Chammah J. Kaunda. 2021. “Conclusion: Isabel Apawo Phiri on Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa.” In *Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*, edited by Chammah J. Kaunda, 205–18. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- Kairos Theologians. 1986. *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa: The Kairos Document*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kanyoro, Musimbi. 2002. “Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle.” In *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster.
- Kanyoro, Rachel Angogo, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. 1990. *Talitha, Qumi!: Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, Trinity College, Legon, Accra, September 24–October 2, 1989*. Ibadan: Daystar Press.
- Kaunda, Chammah J. 2021a. “Introduction.” In *Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

- , ed. 2021b. *Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- Malawi, National Statistical Office. 2019. “2018 Malawi Population and Housing Census Report.” <https://www.nsomalawi.mw>.
- MANEB (Malawi National Examinations Board). n.d. “Background.” Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.maneb.edu.mw/2016-03-12-23-17-32/background.html>.
- Mananzan, Mary John, Mercy Oduyoye, Letty Russell, and Elsa Támez. 1990. “The Spirit is Troubling the Water: Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women.” *Ecumenical Review* 42, no. 3: 225–8.
- Nadar, Sarojini, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Isabel Apawo Phiri, eds. 2002. *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster.
- Nadar, Sarojini and Isabel Apawo Phiri, eds. 2006. *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- . 2010. “African Women’s Theologies.” In *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton, 90–100. London: SPCK.
- . 2012. “Charting the Paradigm Shifts in HIV Research: The Contribution of Gender and Religion Studies.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2: 121–9. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.28.2.121>.
- Njoroge, Nyambura J. 2012. “A Body of Knowledge for HIV Research.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2: 129–33. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.28.2.129>.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- . 2001. *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press.
- . 2009. “The Story of a Circle.” *Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 1: 97–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2001.tb00080.x>.

- Oredein, Oluwatomisin. 2020. "Mercy Amba Oduyoye Centers African Women within Christian Theology." *Sojourners*, December 2020.
- Parratt, John. 1993. "What is Asia? What is Africa?" *Modern Churchman* 34, no. 1: 1–7.
- . 1995. *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2000. "Empowerment of Women Through the Centre for Constructive Theology." *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 354: 329–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2000.tb00210.x>.
- . 2005a. "Healing from the Traumas of Crime in South Africa: Interaction of African Religion with Christianity as Perceived by African Female Traditional Healers." In *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church*, edited by Ingo Wulfhorst: 25–40. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation.
- . 2005b. "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: Its Contribution to Ecumenical Formation." *Ecumenical Review* 57, no. 1: 34–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2005.tb00216.x>.
- . 2007a. "Marching, Suspended and Stoned: Christian Women in Malawi." In *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratisation in Theological Perspectives*, edited by Kenneth R. Ross: 74–122. Zomba: Kachere Series.
- . 2007b. *Women, Patriarchy and Presbyterianism: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*. Zombo: Kachere Monographs.
- . 2009. "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989–2008)." *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 1: 105–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2009.00009.x>.
- . 2010. "HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission." In *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, edited by Kwok Pui Lan, 219–28.
- . 2015. "Living Together in the Household of God: A Theological Reflection." Paper presented at the D. T. Niles

- Memorial Lecture, 14th General Assembly Christian Conference of Asia, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 22, 2015. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents>.
- . 2016. “Introduction and Survey on Recent Research in African Christianity.” In *Anthology of African Christianity*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, Chammah Kaunda, and Kennedy Owino, 3–11. Oxford: Regnum Books.
- . 2018. “WCC Deputy General Secretary Phiri: Women and Men, Towards a Just Community.” YouTube. October 31, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPM0wG7Mvpw>.
- . 2019. “The Imperative of *Diakonia* for the Church and Theological Education.” *Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 4: 482–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12443>.
- . 2020a. “Reaching the Champions of Social Justice: Blind Spots in the Ecumenical Racial and Gender Response.” *Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 1: 62–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev12492>.
- . 2020b. “Women in Church.” Interview by Lucia Cuocci. *Protestantesimo*, Rai 2, February 27, 2020. <https://www.raiplay.it/ricerca.html?q=Phiri>.
- and Chammah J. Kaunda. 2017. “Gender.” In *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson, 386–96. Edinburgh: University Press.
- and Sarojini Nadar. 2009. “‘Going through the Fire with Eyes Wide Open’: African Women’s Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Patriarchy and Sexuality.” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 22, no. 2: 5–21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24764316>.
- and Sarojini Nadar. 2011. “‘The Personal is Political’: Faith and Religion in a Public University.” *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 14: 81–94. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2408>.
- and Dietrich Werner, eds. 2013. *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*. Oxford: Regnum Books International.

- , Dietrich Werner, Chammah Kaunda, and Kennedy Owino, eds. 2016. *Anthology of African Christianity*. Oxford: Regnum, Books.
- Pobee, John. 2009. "Travelling through Memory Lane: Theological Education in the World Council of Churches." *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 1: 147–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2009.00012.x>.
- Ross, Kenneth R., ed. 2007. *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratisation in Theological Perspectives*. Zomba: Kachera Series.
- Smart, Ninian. 1996. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- UKZN (University Kwa-Zulu Natal). n.d.a. "History." Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://ukzn.ac.za/about-ukzn/history>.
- . n.d.b. "Professor Maxwell Phiri." School of Management, IT and Governance. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://smitg.ukzn.ac.za/team/professor-maxwell-phiri>.
- University of Cape Town. n.d. "Alumni Publications: 1992." Department for the Study of Religions. Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.religion.uct.ac.za/religion/alumni/alumnipublications/1992>.
- University of Malawi. n.d. "Gender Studies Unit." Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.unima.mw/centers/chancellor+college/gender-studies-unit>.
- WCC (World Council of Churches). 2008. "Magna Charter on Ecumenical Theological Education in the 21st Century." Ecumenical Theological Education Programme. Reprinted in *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education*, edited by Mélisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner, 389–94. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.
- . 2014. "An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace." WCC Central Committee, July 8, 2014. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents>.
- . 2017. "WCC Policy on Palestine and Israel 1948–2016 (summary)." January 1, 2017. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents>.

- . n.d.a. “What We do.” Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do>.
- . n.d.b. “Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.” Accessed May 24, 2021. <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/eappi>.

Notes

- 1 The Malawi government census report of 2018 shows that the total population of Malawi is 17,563,749. About 77.3% of the population identifies as Christian, 13.8% as Muslim, and 1.8% practice African traditional religions, 5.6% other faiths, and 2.1% no religion (Malawi 2019, 18).
- 2 This quotation and certain personal details included in this paper come from Isabel Apawo Phiri's responses to questions posed by Lucia Cuocci, which are not included in the video available online. The transcript of her responses was provided to the author by Phiri on December 29, 2020.