

Nurturing Our Calling . . . Strengthening Our Ministry

The Report of the ANITEPAM-Sponsored Consultation on African Women in Theological Education

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Contents

- I. [Introduction](#)
- II. [Consultation Composition](#)
- III. [Discussion Topics and Themes](#)
 - A. [Our Vision for Theological Education in Africa](#)
 - B. [Our Role as Women in Theological Education in Africa](#)
 - C. [The Challenges Faced by Women in Theological Education](#)
 - D. [Making Connections I: Structures Existing That Can be in Solidarity with African Women in Theological Education](#)
 - E. [Making Connections II: Working with Other Groups in Solidarity](#)
 - F. [Making Connections III: Women in TEE and Residential Programmes Supporting One Another](#)
 - G. [Making Connections IV: Women in Theological Education Supporting Women's Groups in Africa](#)
- IV. [Summary](#)

ANITEPAM is the African Network of Institutions of Theological Education Preparing Anglicans for Ministry

Introduction

The ANITEPAM-sponsored Consultation of African Women in Theological Education met to provide a sense of support, solidarity and sisterhood among women who often work in isolation from one another in theological colleges in Africa. As a first time ever event for Anglican women, we have created space in order to hear from one another and identify key issues we face. We have been discerning ways we can sustain our ministries through our own efforts and with the help of groups like ANITEPAM.

We want to thank ANITEPAM and United Thank Offering Programme of the Episcopal Church women, Episcopal Church, USA for a special grant, as well as the Companions in World Mission, Diocese of Washington, D.C., USA for the material support which has made our work together in this consultation possible.

Our overall goal, through this report is to share the work accomplished at this consultation, to provide a framework for our continuing efforts, and to communicate

as African women in theological education with the Anglican communion, partner-churches and others our concerns and our vision for our work in ministries.

Consultation Composition



Consultation participants represented clergy, law women, and Church Army Sisters involved in various aspects of theological education within the Anglican Church of Africa-- teachers, administrators, advanced degree and university students, and international church partners. We have come from the following countries: Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Canada

and the United States.

Discussion Topics and Themes

During the consultation, participants addressed four major themes and several sub-topics as well as engaging in important story-telling, Bible study and prayer, and examination of our situation as women in theological education. Groups of women made formal panel presentations to challenge participants, followed by group discussions and identification of issues, needs and action steps. The following sections outline these major themes, concerns and directions for the future.

Our Vision for Theological Education in Africa

Our panelists observed that a key issue about the current situation in theological education is that theological education is the province of men and is male-dominated. To illustrate this problem, we offer the following examples provided by participants.

Example A. Historically and currently, theological education has been structured for preparation for ordination exclusively. although women have recently received the right to ordination in a few areas, the reality is that most African women are barred from the prospect of ordination. This continues to perpetuate theological education as preparation for the ordination of men, excluding most women and even men who do not seek ordination but theological education in order to fulfill their call to ministry.

Example B. After surveying the colleges represented, it was clear that women are still token participants in theological education as teachers and as students.

The discussion led the group to two major affirmations regarding the vision for theological education in Africa.

First, theological education must be relevant to the contemporary realities of Africa-- general violence, civil war, and the creation of refugees in society, and especially the physical, political, social and economic violence against women. We stress that

relevancy also means assisting African peoples in the goal of Christian life, that is, living abundantly.

Second, theological education must be inclusive of the perspectives of women, participation of women, and issues impacting women. Our vision for theological education, therefore, entails the following:

1. Two kinds of de-colonization--de-colonization of the Bible, that is, re-reading the Bible with new eyes that lift up African perspectives and which address biblical interpretation of women's humanity, women's stories, and the use of the Bible by Africans to subordinate women; and simultaneously, the de-colonization of African women's and men's minds about the role(s) of women and men in society at-large.
2. The inclusion of women's studies programs in the curriculum of theological education which educate students about issues impacting African women.
3. The encouragement and support of female teachers to write theologically from the perspectives of women about women's issues.
4. The review of the traditional theological curriculum(s) which are currently used in our colleges in order to assess their adequacy for the contemporary challenges to the Church.
5. Theological education must be aimed at the laity--the ministry of women, men, youth, and children in the local parishes--and not be the exclusive property of theological institutions themselves.
6. Support by partner churches and theological institutions in the West must include biblical and theological books and materials which are contemporary and up-to-date, and which include resources for, by, and about women.
7. There must be more adequate funding and allocation of resources--money and facilities--for the support of women students and women teachers.

Our Role as Women in Theological Education in Africa

The participants discussed our individual and collective roles as women in theological education. Two issues discussed, the male-dominance of theological education and the need for the de-colonization of the Bible, as well as women's and men's minds, have been addressed above. However, several other critical areas of concern were debated--women's commitment to study and to write for the theological curriculum and the Church, and the need for solidarity with women in the struggle for justice in other areas of African society.

1. Women students and teachers must write more articles and resources, and communicate throughout the Church about justice for women in theological education, women and biblical interpretation, and women's leadership in the church, both historically and currently.
2. Women in theological education must make and be in solidarity with women in other areas of society to make claims and work for justice for women.
3. Women in theological education must take courage to challenge aspects of traditional African culture and Church practices that are used to oppress them, and to risk making changes for equal opportunities for women and men.

Challenges Faced by Women in Theological Education

In discussing this aspect, the participants observed that, like women in other professions, they faced the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of society on them as wives and mothers. These expectations create exploitation of women's labor at home and in the workplace. Further, these expectations mean that women work twice as hard as do men, have to be twice as qualified than men to do the same job, and receive less pay than men for the same work. One illustration indicates that highly- or over-qualified women seeking teaching positions in theological education are given jobs as secretaries or bookstore clerks rather than classroom positions.

A second challenge raised by participants was the literal interpretation of the Bible which is used in the churches and which influences the theological curriculum(s) currently in use in theological colleges. The literal interpretation of the bible, just like cultural traditions, are used to exploit and oppress women.

Further, the consultation discussed and stressed the problem of sexual violence in the church and in the wider community. Female staff and students in theological institutions have been subjected to sexual violence, *inter alia* at the hands of Church leaders, which is not treated as a crime. Such violence is rather blamed on the women. Lack of procedures and systems through which women would seek help from sexual violence has meant that most women suffer silently.

In case of sexual violence or pregnancy, gender was used to determine discipline, and in which case women were most adversely affected. In the case of student pregnancy, the female student involved would be discharged from the institution or job while no action was taken against the male student involved.

Yet another challenge is faced by women who are afforded the opportunity to study abroad. They face further challenges in as much as they face alienation from their support groups at home. They run the risk that they are, in the view of some at home, "westernized" and "overeducated."

Making connections I: structures existing that can be in solidarity with african women in theological education

The Consultation heard presentations about the work and structure of ANITEPAM and the possible structures available to participants from the newly organization International Anglican Women's Network (IAWN) and seminaries in the West.

The IAWN links together all Anglican women worldwide. It is rooted in prayer, and seeks to participate in church life as a transforming agent. The Beijing Platform for Action is accepted as a norm for women's rights by the Network. Its goal is to enable every person to be liberated by the Gospel.

It is one of eight networks which act as resources to the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). When a group of Anglican women, through research, dialogue and analysis

have concluded that there are issues that need to be taken seriously by the Lambeth Conference and the ACC, it may communicate such issues to the IAWN coordinator. African women in theological education can write to: Liz Barnes, Anglican Women's Fellowship, PO Box 304, Auchland Park 2006, South Africa. Telephone fax: c/o Jenny Frye, 27-21-790-1029.

A presentation was then given on the structures of women's studies programs in religion in the United States. Four program models were outlined which can be viewed in two ways. First, these models can serve as clues that African women in theological education can use in creating possibilities in and for their own contexts to develop course syllabi, to design African-appropriate women studies programs, and to transform the theological curriculum. Second, these models can offer insight and help to African women in their search and decision-making when considering studying in U.S. seminaries and graduate schools of religion. The four models follow:

1. Programs which focus on the development of theory, historical research, methodological approaches to the study of women's experiences and issues in religion and theological curriculum. Harvard University Divinity School's Program in Women, Religion, Gender and Culture is an example of this type of program.
2. Programs which focus on theologies from women's perspectives, practice-based ministry from women's perspectives, and social transformation, and draw insights from the traditional theological curriculum, liberation theology, cultural critique, and the analysis of power relations in church and society. Episcopal Divinity School is an example of this type of program.
3. Programs which focus on a multi-disciplinary approach--studying religion in conjunction with the social sciences, history, economics, literature, and politics--that allow students to deal with a variety of theoretical perspectives and religious traditions; which integrate three kinds of study--theological studies, religious studies, and women's studies. Claremont Graduate School (Claremont School of Theology) is an example of this type of program.
4. Programs which focus on feminist liberation theology, women's spirituality, feminist approaches to the Bible, church history and ethics. Programs offering these subjects throughout their curriculum can be found in most mainline Protestant seminaries in the U.S.

Making Connections II: Working With Others Groups in Solidarity

Crucial to a holistic struggle for justice for women in church and society, women in theological education in Africa believe that it is fundamentally important to be in solidarity with others and not just ourselves. The aim of the ministry, our ministries, and our involvement in theological education is to reach out for others, for justice, and for the liberation of the whole of humanity. We must not do theology then in isolation of other people. Our concerns are local, national, continental and global, and indeed, the entire Realm of God. This is why many people are interested and willing to be co-partners with us or to work with us. As the Baganda people say, "We enjoy meals only when we are sharing with others." This saying highlights the significance of participating and being in solidarity with others. Therefore, it is our responsibility to

work out plans and ways in which we can be in solidarity with others so as to implement our goals. Ways we must work include:

1. Developing processes including affirmative action, that get representation of women who will advocate for justice for women in theological education onto boards and commissions of the church.
2. Networking with lay women who are professionals to make them aware of women's issues and situations, and to request their advocacy on Church boards and commissions.
3. Advocating that marriage is the choice of individuals, both men and women, and not a prerequisite for ordination, but rather advocating that a prerequisite be that theological education be useful to the people.
4. Enlisting the support of sympathetic men in the work of justice for women.
5. Being assertive about inviting dialogue with groups whose goals are justice concerns and to engage in joint programs with them--government and non-government organizations, university groups, women's groups, medical professionals, and so forth.

Making Connections III: Women in TEE and Residential Programmes Supporting One Another

We affirm that TEE is a prime example of the potential purpose of theological education--the theological education and training of the laity so that they can fulfill their ministry. And further, that TEE has the potential for theologically educating professional women, women in the home and women farmers, and can thus be used to struggle against women's oppressive socialization. In that case, we must pursue the following:

1. TEE materials need always to be available on a level understandable to people in local parishes and not written as if for theological educators.
2. TEE make use of available traditional oral resources, that is myths, folklore, and proverbs which affirm the dignity of all women.
3. Request that ANITEPAM produce materials for biblical and theological interpretation that affirm women from women's perspectives.
4. That women in theological education in Africa seek women writers through the WCC Sub-Unit on Women and the Circle of Concern African Women Theologians to assist in writing materials and resources from women's perspectives for TEE.
5. Train TEE directors and leaders about issues facing women in theological education and the theological curriculum.

Making Connections IV: Women in Theological Education Supporting Women's Groups in Africa

The Consultation affirms that solidarity with others must include women in theological education addressing the following:

1. We must give theological interpretation to the situations in which women live their lives since Africans are religious people and see everything we do as religious; it is affirming to take African women's lives as a basis for doing theology.
2. We must work to demystify the practices and teachings of the Church which oppress women and which cause women to sanction their own oppression; our church which can be identified as life-affirming and relevant to women.
3. We must work to assist women and ourselves to break the silences about women's lives, and to challenge the things inside the Church and outside it which oppress women: polygamy, inheritance, widowhood rituals, female genital mutilation, bride wealth dowry, forced marriage, child and wife abuse, and wife battering.
4. As women theologians, we must link our issues in the Church with those issues outside the Church which are justice-seeking: freedom from economic, sexual, social, and political violence.
5. We must provide tools for Bible study and prayer materials for women and liturgies for use in the Church which can be identified as life affirming and relevant to women.
6. We must cause discomfort in the Church until it changes, and call the Church to legal accountability and repentance for what the Church has done to oppress women; for example, for wrongful advice given in pastoral care and counseling to the detriment of women.
7. We must work in solidarity with women's groups and individuals trying to get involved in decision-making processes, especially those affecting women, in the Church and in society.
8. We must challenge the hierarchical structures within women's groups in the Church and establish structures of equality.
9. We must develop and share skills, to empower women to analyze Church teachings and traditional myths and proverbs as they affect women.
10. We must seek economic independence and stability for women; further, we must work to dismantle the policies of structural adjustment and its ensuing debt crisis crippling our countries.
11. We must support the welfare of girls in church and society by providing them with security, health services, and equal educational opportunities.

We must address the issue of HIV/AIDS as it oppresses women in African societies. We must also condemn the stigmatization of victims of AIDS through the following:

1. Finding ways to work with others to relieve the psychological, economic, spiritual, and life-threatening consequences of promiscuity.
2. Providing pastoral care and counseling services.
3. Challenging the stigmatization of women who choose to separate from their husbands, and challenge the stigmatization of women and men infected by the virus.

4. Strongly advocate the use of abstinence, the use of condoms, and faithfulness in marriage.

Summary

Our work as a growing, energetic network of African women in theological education in Africa is just beginning at this new level, and we are excited! Because we have been able to so deeply get to know one another in Christian sisterhood and solidarity, and have discovered and collectively brought to light the depth of our situations as African women in theological education in Africa, we now know that this consultation cannot be only one historical moment. We make two calls:

We call upon ANITEPAM and our church partners to enable and resource a next meeting of African women in theological education in Africa in January, 2000, in West Africa; we suggest Ghana.

We call for the election and consecration of an African woman bishop by the year 2000 as we enter the Third Millennium in the Reign of Jesus Christ!

As we brought the consultation to a close, participants reminded themselves and each other of a fundamental insight reiterated throughout the meeting:

We must commit ourselves to the transformation of the Church and we must remember that we too are part of the Church, the Body of Christ Jesus!

Thus, the work we have set out for ourselves in relation to the Anglican Church, our church partners, our theological colleges, and our African societies is and will be part of our ministries for the love of the Church and in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

We commit ourselves to a transformational church, a community of equals in the church of women and men, and one which models God's peace, love, and justice for the whole world.

Therefore, we commit ourselves to this framework and to this road of action.