

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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## JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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for the sake of the success of its unity. Consequently, many things were not ironed out during the formative years of this federative denomination. Besides, the emerging African leadership did not play a significant role in the formation of the union and yet they were the ones to be entrusted with its future life. Consequently, the indigenous leadership of the CCAP has had to struggle with an elusive unity of the denomination over the course of its history.

The study validates the research hypotheses that the CCAP, with its ongoing inner wrangles and its own leadership's recognition of lack of real unity, has lost its denominational bearings, having become in fact a loose umbrella body of five distinct 'denominations.' The study further demonstrates that the original intention of the founding fathers of the CCAP to retain Synodical autonomy in respect of the mother churches arrested the development of the CCAP into a single and fully united denomination. In view of these observations it follows that whatever unity the future of the CCAP holds, it must first of all be acknowledged that there is actually no one CCAP denomination but five denominations. It must also be realised that the CCAP has actually never been a single denomination before, except in assumption. The efforts of the CCAP to move forward in its unity have often been hampered by references to a history that cannot be fully apprehended as it was beyond the grasp of African leadership to take full control of the CCAP while the missionaries, who were the initiators of the project, belonged to their own exclusive camps. The onus is therefore on the current leadership to re-orientate the denomination since current developments show that the denomination has reached a stage where a drastic landmark decision in its history is supposed to be made. I argue that this re-orientation of the denomination can only be successful if the leaders of the synods are concerned more with the future of the CCAP and its contribution to the Kingdom of God than with current divisions or the glorious past of the missionary era from whence the CCAP synods have come.



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in Malawi. These include the Living Waters Church, Calvary Family Church, Glad Tidings Church and the Agape Church, among others, before some conclusions for the making of Malawian society are drawn.

Munyenyembe, Rhodian. **A history of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) as a federative denomination (1924-2015)**. Ph.D. Thesis, Church History and Polity, University of the Free State. 2015. URL: <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/handle/11660/4552>

**Abstract:** This study is about the history of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) as a federative denomination in South-Central Africa. This denomination comprises five synods that are more or less independent of each other and function in a kind of federation known as the General Assembly. The research issue was identified by observing that following the Presbyterian system of church government, one would expect that the church's courts would continue to become stronger and more powerful from the session to the General Assembly. However, what one actually sees on the ground is that real administrative and ecclesiastical power ends with the synods, so much so that the General Assembly appears to be a kind of umbrella organisation of no real significance. This is so despite the transformation of the constitution of the General Assembly in 2002, which aimed at giving more power to the General Assembly over and above the synods. This means that despite the CCAP clergy's intention to give more power to the General Assembly, the autonomy of the synods makes them more powerful than the General Assembly itself.

The aim of this research was to investigate the history and nature of the CCAP as a federative denomination. The study makes a conscious departure from most research activities on the CCAP which confine themselves to the histories of individual synods and or issues related to them without trying to engage with a composite history of the synods together with their General Assembly. This study therefore makes an original contribution to knowledge in the area of Church History and Polity by engaging with an integrated history of the synods and General Assembly of one of the mainline Protestant churches in South-Central Africa, thereby enriching our knowledge of Church History in this region. The research was done through gathering of material from archival sources and contemporary documents and conducting informal and formal in-depth interviews with key informants. The material gathered from these activities was analysed systematically following the procedures of qualitative research. The study shows that the CCAP Synods share their theological and historical roots all the way to the Reformation through the life and ministry of John Calvin in Geneva. The study also shows that the CCAP is a child of revivals as the missions that gave birth to the denomination were actually influenced by the spirit of revivals. It has been shown that during the formation of the CCAP there was much cooperation among the missionaries, indicating that the synods have always been one in cooperation and not in competition with one another, at least in their early history. However, things began to change with the actual process of the formation of the CCAP as the different attitudes of missionary personnel from the three original missions began to manifest. The result of such differences was that the formation of the CCAP endured many compromises

informative but also challenging and thought-provoking. Scholars, students and other readers who share an interest in mission and the life of the Church in Malawi will find this collection of essays indispensable in the many years to come.”  
([www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com))

Musopole, Augustine. **uMunthu Theology**. Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2022. \$32.00.  
[www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com) ISBN: 9789996060960

**Description:** “What is the key to understanding in a truly Malawian way? After a lifetime's theological reflection, the author finds the answer in the concept of uMunthu (personhood or human-ness). Drawing on Malawi's cultures and languages, the biblical text and the evangelical faith, he casts a theological vision that can be transformative for church and nation.” ([www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com))

### Open Access Resources

Fiedler, Rachel NyaGondwe; Johannes Wynand Hofmeyr, **The birth and growth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi 1989-2011**. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol. 37, n.2, 2011. Pretoria.  
URI:<http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5127>

**Abstract:** Although two Continental Coordinators of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle) are Malawians, the Malawi Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians had a slow start and has had limited growth. The Malawi Circle was started in 1990, a year after the official launch of the Africa-wide Circle in 1989. This article describes the contributions of the two Malawian Circle Continental Coordinators to the genesis and growth of the Malawi Circle and the contributions of the current Malawi Circle Coordinator. Since its inception, the Malawi Circle has been influenced either negatively or positively by various factors. This article indicates and evaluates some factors in terms of whether they have had a positive or negative impact on the development of the Circle. While the picture of the Malawi Circle shows a relatively dark past, there are opportunities through which the Malawi Circle can attain a brighter future.

Gadamal, Richard Gracious; Johannes Wynand Hofmeyr. **The early formation of charismatic churches in Malawi and their significance for the making of Malawian society**. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*. Vol. 42, n.2, 2016. Pretoria. On-line version ISSN 2412-4265; Print version ISSN 1017-0499  
<http://ref.scielo.org/cdhsx4>

**Abstract:** In this article, we look at the history of charismatic churches in Malawi with a particular focus on some of the early charismatic churches. We first define what charismatic churches are. Secondly, we explore and explain the tremendous charismatic revival, tracing it from the time of its penetration in Malawi, its spread and also its survival on Malawian soil. The article also briefly focuses on the decisive role of women in the establishment of some of the early charismatic churches

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Photos: Isabel Phiri and Augustine Musopole

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## Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrict, Head, BU African Studies Library

**Anthology of African Christianity (Handbook).** Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, Chammah J. Kaunda, Kennedy Owino (Editors). Fortress Press, 2016. \$39.21 (hbk) [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) ISBN-10: 1506474926 ISBN-13: 978-1506474922

**Description:** By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Christianity has taken shape and established roots in all areas of African reality. It has come to stay. Therefore, we welcome Christianity afresh in Africa, where it has arrived to continue the ancient and vibrant Christianity in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. It is appropriate that the *Anthology of African Christianity* presents, in valuable detail, this new reality that describes its African landscape in totality. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

Fiedler, Klaus & Kenneth R. Ross. **A Malawi Church History 1860 – 2020.** Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2020. \$71.00 [www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com) ISBN: 9789996060748

**Description:** “This is the first attempt to comprehend the whole of Malawi's church history in a single volume. The focus of this book is about documenting the religious experience which was at the centre of founding the new nation of Malawi as we have come to know it. The book strikes a balance in covering issues pertaining to both mission activities and African agency. In many instances interesting pieces of evidence have been marshalled to corroborate or emphasize some of the conclusions reached.” ([www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com))

Jonathan Nkhoma, Rhodian Munyenembe, Hany Longwe (Editors), Klaus Fiedler. **Mission in Malawi: essays in honour of Klaus Fiedler.** Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2021. \$55.00 [www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com) ISBN: 9789996060847

**Description:** “The first four essays in *Mission in Malawi* reassess the meaning, nature and place of mission in a postmodern world. Subsequent essays examine various issues that missionaries and the Church in Malawi have and continue to struggle with. These range from the problem of administering church discipline, the challenge of Bible translation, the question of how to deal with corruption in the corridors of power to the challenges of dealing with initiation rites, HIV/AIDS, patriarchy, gender inequality, the exercise of the Church's prophetic role, lack of contextualized theology, and the difficult task of creating an inclusive church and society. The last three essays are an attempt to describe a contextual theology appropriate for the African church, construct a theology for Malawi and project a future for mission in Malawi in the context of a changing world. These essays offer a rare window into the life and struggles of the Malawian Church even as it faces the postmodern future. The essays are not only

Bediako's theology, summarizing it and those critical of it for the sake of understanding Bediako's work. The second difference seems to be in terms of intended audience. Hartman's book appears aimed at a readership beyond the academy that is primarily Christian and Western, and generally unaware of Bediako's work. In contrast, Fretheim seems to intend her book for scholars of African religions who are already familiar with Bediako's writings.

These books gesture towards exciting avenues for future research. Both present (and to a degree, join) those who critique Bediako for his lack of political engagement or public theology. Is this lack of political theology connected with Bediako's identity as an evangelical, and what insights might be gained if one applied Fretheim's approach to provide an analysis of the historical context of global evangelicalism that frames Bediako's scholarship and ministry? Fretheim's approach promises to yield better understanding of other theologians as well. Hartman's book encourages theologians to theologize from their experience, particularly in terms of wrestling through their experience of identity. As hybridity and pluralism become increasingly normal in Western cultures, Hartman offers Westerner Christians pointers for taking theology in new, pragmatic, and meaningful directions. Fretheim's coverage of the study of African religions calls for further exploration of postmodern epistemologies that are academically rigorous and congruent with the convictions of both scholars of faith and scholars without faith, Christian or otherwise. Her treatment of Bediako's emphasis on communal learning supports the idea of more collaborative projects between scholars across differences of faith, to provide more fair, nuanced, and insightful studies of religion. In these and other ways, both books further illuminate Bediako's life and thought, and provide the contours of helpful avenues for future research.

Luke B. Donner  
Boston University<sup>69</sup>

## Learning, Teaching, Writing in the “Life-Dance with God”: Figures from Malawi

By Michèle Miller Sigg

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography*, introduces readers to the concept of *uMuntu* theology—“a reflective life-dancing with God in the cosmos and through time ... a celebrative reflection on our being with God.” This is how it is described by our featured theologian, Augustine Chingwala Musopole, author of *uMuntu Theology: An Introduction* (Mzuni Press, 2018).

Exceptionally, his biography is the only article in this issue that describes the life of a historical figure. Next, the stories of two living theologians out of Malawi illustrate the “life-dance” Musopole describes, both in their lives and their writing. Isabel Phiri, a larger-than-life educator-mentor-academic-advocate, is an influential figure among African women theologians and a past leader of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who has “centered the voices of women in Africa.” Klaus Fiedler is a scholar missionary who has made his home in Malawi for many decades. His scholarship focuses on bringing into the light figures, movements, and issues that are “off the beaten track.” He does this by “inviting us to take a second look at those who have been discounted, (...) excluded, pushed to the margins, not taken seriously.”

The excitement of the “life dance with God” also comes through the lines of the report on the church history workshop that took place in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, in March. Sixteen men and women from three Mennonite churches participated in an intensive course in global and African Christian history as well as oral history methodology. The purpose was to equip them to write biographies for a book to be published by Langham on African Christian biography—hopefully the first of a DACB series.

In the book review section, Goodwin Zainga analyzes Marc Thiesen's historical work on the Churches of Christ in Malawi and Luke B. Donner offers a comparative review on two recent books that take stock of Kwame Bediako's intellectual legacy. And as always, Beth Restrict has collected a series of works worthy of our attention—this time related to Malawian Christian history and theology.

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<sup>69</sup> Luke Donner is a first-year doctoral student in World Christianity at Boston University School of Theology.

## Featured Biography

### Musopole, Augustine Chingwala

1948-2021

Presbyterian

Malawi

Augustine Musopole was a prolific Malawian theologian, known particularly for what he termed *uMunthu* theology. [1] He was born on August 12, 1948 in Chinongo Village, in the Misuku Hills of Chitipa District in northern Malawi, the fifth of the ten children of the Rev Yoram Musopole and Tupokiwe Nasilumbu. His father, a pastor serving with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Synod of Livingstonia, was a second generation Christian while his mother was first generation. He was named after Augustine of Hippo, the church father, about whom his father had learned as he embarked on his ministerial training at Livingstonia Theological School during the year when Augustine was born. It was a devout home in which the day never finished without singing at least one hymn from among the many indigenous compositions that distinguished the first generation of Livingstonia Christians. These hymns remained with Augustine throughout his life and his last book was a theological exposition of a wide selection of them, titled *Singing and Dancing for God*. [2] He belonged to the Ndali tribe, which in turn had historically been part of the Nyika ethnic group that had spanned northern Malawi and adjacent parts of Zambia and Tanzania. This was reflected in Augustine's praise names: *Rungwe*, *Munyika*, *Musango*, *Munkholongwa*, *Munkhondya*, *wa ku Mphachi* and *Hapumba ha bulezi*. Chindali was his mother tongue, but he also became fluent in Chinkonde, Chitumbuka and Chinyanja while he was growing up.

He attended the nearby Ifumbo Primary School during the tumultuous time in Malawi's history that followed the imposition of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953. Throughout the 1950s, opposition to the Federation grew and one of the most militant leaders was Augustine's uncle, "General" Flax Musopole, who led a guerrilla campaign against British colonial rule in the Karonga-Chitipa area. Augustine's father, while in sympathy with resistance to the Federation, took a much more moderate and pastoral approach. This led to considerable tension between the two brothers, exacerbated by the fact that Flax had declared himself to be an atheist, an unusual move in Malawi at that time. Nonetheless, they remained loyal to one another. After the political crisis was resolved by Malawi's attainment of independence in 1964, despite their diametrically opposed worldviews, "they got along well through their kinship bond." [3]

In 1963 Augustine proceeded to Likuni Boys Secondary School in Lilongwe District, a Roman Catholic institution run by the Marist Brothers. Here he associated with the recently formed Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM). It was at one of their national conferences, held at Chongoni in 1966, that he experienced a personal conversion to Christ after hearing the testimony of a fellow student. He always

the role of ancestors in Akan life and thought, before outlining how Bediako understood Christ to fulfill the role of the greatest ancestor. This chapter makes clear the connection between vernacular Bible translation and theologizing contextually, as Bediako began to build his ancestor Christology after reading a Twi translation of Col. 1:15-17. Next, chapter six describes the flaws that Bediako perceived in Western theology, primarily located in the elimination of religious alternatives in Europe, as well as the destruction of "primal" imaginaries of the peoples there. Rather than allowing African theology to be determined by the West, Bediako encouraged a grassroots approach to theology in which Africans theologize from their daily experience, particularly in regards to navigating their sense of personal identity.

In the final chapter, Hartman discusses the implications of Bediako's writings on public theology. Primarily, Bediako emphasized the valid (if incomplete) substance of non-Christian African religions, and therefore the need to engage their adherents with humility and respect. Additionally, he saw Christianity as helping Africans politically by preparing leaders who would end colonialism, as well as by desacralizing political power, which promotes democracy and the protection of human rights. From these overviews, Hartman offers a number of conclusions. First, he reiterates that Western Christianity is syncretistic, and identifies three resultant weaknesses: it has no answer for religious pluralism, it features too much Enlightenment philosophy and not enough living Church, and it needs to recover its "primal" spirituality to be meaningful again. Next, Hartman acknowledges aspects of Bediako's scholarship that may be difficult for Westerners to accommodate, such as Bediako's evangelical theology and use of male pronouns for God. Finally, he concludes that Bediako still offers a way forward by exemplifying how others can theologize locally, regardless of their context.

This book offers several strengths. Its thematic structure allows readers to approach Bediako's theology in easily accessible parts, and Hartman carefully weaves important criticisms of Bediako's work into each chapter. Accordingly, this work is an excellent introduction to Bediako's theology. It also goes a long way in connecting Bediako's insightful and corrective theology with a wider readership in the West. One topic that would have been interesting to see in this book is a discussion of Bediako's relationship with Evangelicalism, given his self-identification as an evangelical despite his strong criticism of Western Christianity. Additionally, Hartman's use of the term "syncretistic" to describe Western Christianity was notable, since it seems an unhelpful descriptor and Bediako himself apparently repudiated its use.<sup>68</sup> However, these small points by no means overshadow the value of this book.

Here, the two monographs can finally be put into conversation with one another. Both books take Bediako's life seriously as a context for understanding his scholarship. In their presentations of his biography, both interrogate the relationship between Bediako's *négritude* and theological writings. Nonetheless, these books differ in several respects. First, Fretheim's work is primarily historical, examining the histories of Bediako's cultural and political contexts in Ghana and France, and how those influenced his theology. Hartman, on the other hand, prioritizes the content of

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<sup>68</sup> Hartman, 52.



contexts...proves to be a fruitful one.”<sup>66</sup> It provides a richer understanding of Bediako's insistence on desacralized political authority, as well as the influence of *négritude* on his methodology of connecting pre-Christian traditions to theology and African Christian history. Further, it helps the reader understand the underlying intuitions guiding Bediako's thought. At the same time, this book does not engage with Bediako's scholarship systematically, such that this book might better serve someone already familiar with the contours of Bediako's thought. This is not necessarily a weakness, however, and is a self-conscious corrective to overly narrow analyses of Bediako's ideas.

It is now possible to turn to Hartman's book, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*. This very readable work concisely communicates Bediako's ideas on a variety of topics, and is an embodiment of the author's call for Western Christians to “begin the process of learning from those outside the West.”<sup>67</sup> Hartman achieves this by outlining Bediako's thought thematically, in which each chapter addresses a specific motif of Bediako's corpus.

The first chapter focuses on identity, primarily regarding how Bediako attempted to understand his own. Of all the chapters, this seems the most historical in its approach, outlining the life of the theologian, his *négritude* scholarship, his conversion, and his return to teach in Ghana. While framing its discussion in terms of Bediako's personal and intellectual journey, Hartman uses this as a launching point to discuss Bediako's belief in the importance of formulating a distinctly African Christian identity.

In the second chapter, Hartman discusses the universal translatability of Christianity in Bediako's thought. Each translation of the universal Gospel is contextual, and therefore Bediako saw universalizing any contextual articulation of the Gospel as wrong. Here, Hartman articulates his conclusion that Bediako saw Western Christianity as syncretistic and corrupted, and that Bediako saw his work as pushing back against illegitimate attempts to universalize a Western instantiation of Christianity.

In the third chapter, Hartman examines Bediako's treatment of history. He artfully connects Akan proverbial thought, *négritude* influences, and Bediako's work on second century African Christian writers to lay out Bediako's construction of African Christian history. Bediako saw African Christianity as the African experience of the Gospel and of African pre-Christian traditions, with the entailment that Africans have a Christian past. Bediako sought to absorb traditional African spirituality into Christianity by finding Christ in the former. Next, the fourth chapter considers Bediako's theology of vernacularization. Hartman examines Bediako's belief that translation of the Bible enables the Gospel to speak to a culture, providing the grounds to theologizing locally. This section also explores Bediako's reasoning in identifying Christianity as indigenous to Africa.

In chapter five, Hartman outlines Bediako's ancestor Christology. He describes

looked back on this as the definitive event of his life. Soon afterwards, together with his brother Willie, he attended the Keswick Convention that had been started in the city of Blantyre and this gave him a “grounding” in the faith. [4] He also became a member of St Columba's, a Presbyterian congregation known for its connections with revival Christianity. At the same time, he was developing academically as he took his Bachelor of Social Science degree at the recently founded Chancellor College of the University of Malawi, graduating in 1971. He then left Malawi to embark on theological studies at Trinity Theological College in Bristol, in the United Kingdom, an Evangelical Anglican stronghold that offered the London University Bachelor of Divinity. Besides profiting from the curriculum offered at the College, the Bristol years were decisive theologically for Musopole as he navigated a crisis of identity. He was profoundly shocked by his encounter with permissive British culture and whiteness. This made him more appreciative of the value systems with which he had grown up in Malawi and he identified the Malawian understanding of *uMunthu* (human-ness) as the cornerstone of what he had come to cherish. [5] This became the foundation on which he would build his theology over the fifty years that lay ahead.

On returning to Malawi in 1974 he served for three years as the General and Travelling Secretary of the Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM). Through its outreach to schools and colleges, numerous young people came to Christ and Musopole remained in touch with many of them for decades to come. In 1977 he became a secondary school teacher and quickly rose to become Headmaster of Robert Laws Secondary School where he introduced a newsletter called UMUNTHU in which he aimed to articulate an African philosophy of education. In 1982 he was appointed an Assistant Regional Education Officer for the Central Region. This gave him the opportunity to return to the University of Malawi as a part-time Masters student and he completed his dissertation on “The Chewa Concept of God and its Implication for Christian Faith” in 1984. [6]

In view of his Evangelical formation, it caused some surprise when Musopole's next move was to enroll at Union Theological Seminary in New York, well known for its liberal theology. He always defended his decision, however, refusing to be drawn into any polarization between conservative and liberal, insisting that “it takes two wings for a bird to fly.” [7] He looked back on his time at Union as one that greatly expanded his understanding of “the relationship of the gospel to matters of liberation, justice and social engagement.” [8] He was also pondering theological method and returning time and again to the concept of *uMunthu*, which he could discuss with his compatriot Harvey Sindima who was studying just across the Hudson River at Princeton Theological Seminary. His doctoral thesis, supervised by Professor James Cone, was titled, “Being Human in Africa: A Critical Examination of the idea of Humanity in the Writings of John Mbiti.” [9] Further opportunity to test out his emerging ideas came with his appointment as Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University in New York, where he taught from 1992 to 1995. It was during this time, in 1994, that he was ordained as a minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

His theological direction was pointing him back towards Malawi and he duly returned to his homeland in 1995. He came back, however, without his wife who took

<sup>66</sup> Sara Fretheim, *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship: Emerging Religious Discourse in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 194.

<sup>67</sup> Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 179.

the decision to remain in the USA as their marriage broke down. Augustine was appointed General Manager of the Christian Literature Association in Malawi (CLAIM), the country's leading Christian publisher. After three years at the helm of CLAIM, he became General Secretary of the Malawi Council of Churches, a post he held from 1998 to 2003. It was a momentous time to be engaged in ecumenical leadership as Malawi had recently broken free from thirty years of Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial rule and was seeking to build a democratic society. Musopole emerged as a major public intellectual during this period, drawing on his *uMunthu* theology to offer a distinctive theological critique. Particularly through his regular column in the Catholic magazine *The Lamp* he brought his theological vision to bear on such issues as corruption, political violence, poverty, civil society, gender, sexual promiscuity, the AIDS pandemic, sexuality, leadership style, constitutionalism, the separation of powers, participatory democracy, national development, education, work ethic and the integrity of the natural environment. The point to which he returned time and again is that such issues will not be resolved without a convincing philosophical and theological basis. He therefore consistently championed *uMunthu* as the basis not only of a viable Malawian theology but also of a just and harmonious national life. Whatever topic he was considering his premise was always that, "the focus has to be on the quality of our humanity (*Umunthu*) and life." [10]

Both in his life and in his theology Musopole combined a profound cherishing of his Malawi roots with wide international exposure. Much of his theological formation had taken place in the UK and the USA. Now he turned his attention to Asia with the idea that Africans and Asians stood to benefit from interaction with one another, rather than being preoccupied with how to relate to their former colonial masters in the West. He therefore accepted an invitation to teach at Chang Jung Christian University in Taiwan, which was his base from 2003 until his retirement in 2014. On his travels he had met Kenyan journalist Dorothy Kweyu whom he married on August 1, 2004. His time was therefore divided between Taiwan and his new family home in Nairobi where he settled for his retirement years. He died there quite suddenly on December 29, 2021. While living a very international life he remained closely connected with Malawi both personally and theologically, as is evident in his seminal book, *uMunthu Theology: An Introduction*, published just a few months before his death.

### Musopole's *uMunthu* Theology

He took *uMunthu* as the core, organising principle for his theology and used this concept as a prism through which to view all of life and every dimension of the Christian faith. Since *uMunthu* is usually translated as "human-ness" or "personhood" it might first appear as if he were suggesting a view of reality that is entirely centred on human life with no place for God. Nothing could be further from what he was proposing, for in Musopole's thinking, true humanity is found in our relationship with God. "It is *uMunthu* as seen in the face of Jesus Christ," he wrote, "that forms the theological norm for reflecting on our relationship with God." [11]

accomplishes this in four main movements. Firstly, she situates Bediako's scholarship in the development of African Christian discourse on the study of African religions. Fretheim discusses the work of Geoffrey Parrinder, Andrew Walls, John Mbiti, and E.B. Idowu in viewing African traditions positively and believing that faith enabled a more empathetic and therefore accurate analysis of religion. She then outlines the debate between African Christian scholars and non-Christian scholars over this epistemology and resultant methodology. While she does not attempt to settle this debate, she acknowledges that there is admirable scholarship on both sides, and calls for mutual engagement between both parties.

Secondly, she presents the history of the Basel Mission to Ghana and its contributions to the development of education there. In particular, she highlights the missionaries' emphasis on vernacular Bible translation, the colonial administrator Gordon Guggisburg's positive view of African traditions, and the collaboration of African and Western scholars at Achimota school. Following this, Fretheim examines the history of Kwame Nkrumah's use of religion in his attempts to consolidate political power after independence. She highlights how Nkrumah made use of Christian motifs, such as the Lord's prayer, as well as traditional African practices, such as oblations, to sacralize his leadership. Fretheim then interrogates Bediako's experience as an undergraduate during Nkrumah's fall from power, and the ways in which that experience connects with his arguments for desacralizing political power in Africa.

Thirdly, Fretheim examines the history of the *négritude* movement, primarily among black francophone intellectuals, including its origins and critics. She then analyzes Tchicaya U'tamsi and his poetry, before providing a history of Bediako's intellectual journey, connection with U'tamsi's work, and conversion to Christianity. She closes this section by highlighting similarities between the goals of *négritude* and Bediako's scholarship, namely identifying for African Christians a history, identity, and a connection between local traditions and Christian theology.

In the fourth and final movement, Fretheim studies Bediako's Akrofi-Christaller Institute (ACI) as a "text." From its curriculum, she concludes that the ACI demonstrates Bediako's high view of scripture, his strong emphasis on the importance of theologizing in the vernacular, and his belief that good theology is practical. She also considers weaknesses of the ACI, the most pointed of which seems to be that it neglects engagement with African politics.

From these chapters, Fretheim draws a few conclusions. Primarily, she finds that Bediako's scholarship is a part of a unique African Christian intellectual discourse that transcends the disciplinary boundaries of the West. She believes that Bediako remains relevant for scholars today both in terms of his ideas as well as his methodology of theologizing locally and communally. Finally, she calls for thoughtful interdisciplinary scholarship and engagement between Christian and non-Christian scholars of African religions.

This book is thoroughly researched and "creatively written. Fretheim is right to conclude that the process of "situating African scholars within their historical

Mpingo wa Khristu, One Cup Church of Christ, and the African Church of God, the role of women is invisible up to now (573).

Chapter Six, “*Assessment and Recent Developments*,” summarises elements of the branches of Churches of Christ representing all three pillars of the Restoration Movement – truth, unity and evangelism – that were well established in the country (581). Different opinions on topics such as tobacco, *thobwa* (local beer), choirs, the use of musical instruments, the role of women in the church, and the use of flowers at funerals caused separation between churches (584).

The author fails to mention that the branch known as Churches of Christ in Malawi also spread to the Central Region especially to the city of Lilongwe during the 1980s. Today it has seven congregations in the city with an average membership of 150. It also has three branches in the northern region, in the city of Mzuzu. Another point that has been overlooked is that, although Mpingo wa Khristu does not pursue the “unity pillar,” nevertheless, due to its work with the community, it is a member of the Christian Hospitals Association of Malawi and Christian Literature Action in Malawi.

Despite these omissions, the book is comprehensive in its coverage and can be highly recommended to readers who are interested in the origins of the different branches of the Churches of Christ found in all corners of Malawi.

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**A comparative review of Sara J. Fretheim, *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship: Emerging Religious Discourse in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Pickwick Publications, 2018) and Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2022).**

These books offer distinct approaches to understanding Kwame Bediako’s scholarship that each seek to represent Bediako fairly and to take his context seriously. Their audiences, methods, and motivations, however, seem quite different. This paper will briefly review each monograph before relating them to one another and suggesting their implications for further studies.

Primarily, Fretheim’s *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship* offers a creative and insightful attempt at elucidating Bediako’s texts by means of analyzing his historical contexts. In so doing, she simultaneously outlines the development of African Christian scholarly discourse on the study of African religions, and is the first to deeply interrogate the influence of Bediako’s *négritude* scholarship on his later work. Fretheim

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He consciously embraced an anthropocentric African worldview, considering everything from the perspective of being human, including the over-arching reality of God who encircles humanity and all creation in cosmic relationality. [12] We begin with our humanity, in Musopole’s methodology, but it is a humanity that can only properly be understood in relation to our Creator God and that can only find its true destiny in the renewal that comes with Jesus Christ. So it is not just humanity in a general sense that he had in mind. For him, *uMunthu* is ultimately defined by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. His understanding of *uMunthu* is also framed by a Christian understanding of sin and redemption. Sin, in his view, is about the loss of true humanity while redemption is the action of God to regain true humanity. “Salvation,” he explained, “is renewal of *umunthu* by the Holy Spirit by receiving the authentic *umunthu* of Jesus Christ as the *Namkungwi* [initiation-master] of eternal life. This is what the gospel is all about.” [13]

Having grounded his understanding of *uMunthu* in the incarnation and redemption of Christ, Musopole also traces its roots to a Malawian cultural understanding. He argued that what is found in Malawi is a view of the world that privileges and cherishes humanity. This is not to say that it privileges humanity instead of God, but rather that it privileges humanity in relationship with God. It is also a deeply relational understanding of humanity. He loved to quote the Tumbuka saying: “*Munthu ndi munthu chifukwa cha banyake*” – a person is human on account of others. This led him to take love as a major theme in his theology.

He was inspired and challenged by the pioneering theological work of his compatriot Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi, with his appeal during the 1930s for a “Christianity of the soil.” [14] For Musopole this sparked a vision of, “a Christianity in which God is present in a true and genuine way to the people of Africa and is not seen as a religious import. The critical question is the way in which the God of the Bible would be at home among African peoples.” [15] Musopole was appalled that in his own time, towards the end of the 20th century, Mwasi’s call had still not been convincingly answered. So he took on himself the mantle of inculturation theologian and imagined, “a development from no theology to some theology, from foreign theologies to local ones, from uncritical to critical questioning, from knowledge to wisdom.” [16] He could see a pathway, which he attempted to follow himself and which he pointed out to others.

One very significant resource for theological work, on which he drew heavily, is Malawi’s vernacular languages. Here he could deploy his own extensive linguistic range, demonstrating that there are important theological insights that can be gained only through vernacular language. He also set much store by wisdom in the construction of theology, contrasting this with the Western privileging of rationality. He appealed to the Chitumbuka saying *uryarya ukugota*, meaning craftiness, or rationality, has its limits. Theology, in his view, needs to draw on wisdom more than rational argument and needs to result in wisdom rather than simply being an academic exercise. It needs to be lived truth, not just rational argument. In a similar vein he sought to work theologically with the song and dance through which life and community find expression in Malawi. So far as he was concerned, singing and dancing

are vital to the theological task since it is through the engagement of our whole being that we arrive at authentic theological knowledge.

This led Musopole to an emphasis on discipleship as a critical component in the making of theology. In his view, faith, obedience, following Christ, are necessary components in the theological task. Above all, he stressed the centrality of love in the theological enterprise: “Epistemologically, love is what joins the heart and the head, the heart is the source of all thoughts, desires, and the centre of being.” [17] This is *uMunthu*, the discovery that we are “made in the image of God in love, with love, through love and for love.” [18] Since he was possibly the first to attempt to construct a fully comprehensive Malawian Christian theology, Musopole’s theological legacy can be expected to remain a standard point of reference for the foreseeable future.

Kenneth R. Ross

#### Notes:

1. See Augustine Chingwala Musopole, *uMunthu Theology: An Introduction* (Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2021).
2. See Augustine Chingwala Musopole, *Singing and Dancing for God* (Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2022).
3. Augustine Chingwala Musopole, “Christianity and Nationalism in Karonga Hills: The Tale of Two Brothers during the Late Colonial Period 1954-1960,” in *Politics, Christianity and Society in Malawi: Essays in Honour of John McCracken*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross and Wapulumuka O. Mulwafu (Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2020, 243-65).
4. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 81.
5. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 86.
6. Augustine Chingwala Musopole, “The Chewa Concept of God and its Implication for Christian Faith,” MA diss., Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1984.
7. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 93.
8. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 96.
9. Augustine Chingwala Musopole, “Being Human in Africa: A Critical Examination of the idea of Humanity in the Writings of John Mbiti,” PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1991. The thesis was later published in book form as *Being Human in Africa: Towards an African Christian Anthropology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).
10. Augustine Musopole, “Jubilee 2000: The Christian Message,” *The Lamp* 21 (January-February 2000): 1.
11. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 28-29.
12. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 31.
13. Augustine Musopole, “Inculturation and the Gospel in Africa,” *The Lamp* 15 (January-February 1999): 14-15.
14. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 13; see further Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi, *Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1998) [1933].

the Churches of Christ is explained while following the missionaries who established Namiwawa Mission with other local leaders such as Ellerton Kundago and several others. Another important aspect of this chapter is the suspension of missionary work at Namiwawa due to the Chilembwe Rising of 1915. The colonial government suspected that some missionaries and local leaders of the church were involved in or sympathized with the Chilembwe Rising. This resulted in the closure of missionary work at Namiwawa mission.

Chapter Three, “*Baptist History of Gowa Mission*,” includes the following subheadings: Origins and Establishment, Spiritual Work at Gowa 1895-1914, Leaders, Leadership Training, and Decline of the Baptist Industrial Mission. This chapter explains how the Baptist Industrial Mission (BIM) fared at Gowa Mission and its decline which resulted in it being purchased by the Foreign Mission Committee of Britain Churches of Christ. The transition was done smoothly without any problems.

Chapter Four, “*Expansion and Diversification (1930-1960)*,” covers: The Return of White Missionaries, New Direction of Churches of Christ, Diversification, The African Church of Christ, The Church of God, The Sons of God, Gowa and Namiwawa Missions and other branches. In this chapter, Thiesen explains the division of churches due to a clash of personalities among the leadership as some opted to embrace the “truth pole” in opposition to the elite clergy hierarchy (297). Branches of the Churches of Christ who embraced the “truth pole” viewed other denominations such as the Dutch Reformed Church members as heathens (300) since they were involved in growing, smoking and sniffing tobacco. In addition, this part also affirms the work of other missionaries from the Churches of Christ in Malawi who promoted the “unity pillar” like Ernest Gray who cultivated friendly ties with members of Providence Industrial Church (PIM) to the extent that in 1933 he was asked to deliver a sermon at the dedication of a new PIM church building (368). The chapter concludes by stating that, on one hand, the Churches of Christ in Malawi, the African Churches of Christ, the Church of God inherited centralized forms of church governance established by British missionaries. On the other hand, One Cup Church of Christ and Mpingo wa Khristu vehemently rejected centralized forms of church governance mirroring their American founders (375).

Chapter Five, “*Spread across the Nation (1961-1981)*,” describes several branches, as indicated by the subheadings: Wendewende Mission, One Cup Churches, Mpingo wa Khristu in the Northern Region, Central Region Mpingo wa Khristu, Mpingo wa Khristu in the Southern Region, Churches of Christ in Malawi, African Churches of Christ. The chapter affirms that the above branches of Churches of Christ which had their roots in the work of American missionaries, embraced the “truth pillar” to the core. This led them to view other branches of the same family as heathens and to reject any forms of church “unity.” There were also differences in church administration. For example, Churches of Christ in Malawi, the African Church of Christ and Church of Christ Wendewende Mission had church sessions for planning and decision making while in Mpingo wa Khristu there weren’t any (385). The role of women was visible in the Churches of Christ in Malawi where they took leadership positions while in

## Book Reviews

### ***Churches of Christ: A History of the Restoration Movement in Malawi 1906-2011.***

Written by Mark Thiesen. Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2021. Paperback. Pp 604, available for £47 at African Books Collective (<https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/churches-of-christ>)

Literature about different branches of the Churches of Christ is rare in Malawi and historical writing about these churches is very limited in scope. Yet, branches of the Churches of Christ are spread throughout Malawi and the membership of these churches contribute greatly to the spiritual, educational and healthcare landscapes of Malawi.

This book is important because it covers the history, existence, and growth of several branches of the Churches of Christ found in Malawi. The book also highlights three different pillars of the Churches of Christ Restoration Movement, namely, truth, unity, and evangelism, the pursuit of which has resulted in splits in the restoration movement. It also considers the contributions of different missionaries in various mission stations across Malawi and different views taken by members of the Churches of Christ in regard to other denominations in the country.

Mark Thiesen, the author, is well placed to write this book not only because of his long experience in Malawi but also because he has a keen interest in bridging the gap that exists in so far as the fundamentals and history of the Restoration Movement are concerned. His non-judgemental approach in expressing the views of different church leaders on the three pillars makes him exceptional.

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter One, “*The History of the Churches of Christ in America and Britain*” covers the following topics: Historical and Theological Background, The Revivals, Churches of Christ in the United States of America and Churches of Christ in Britain. This chapter addresses the origins of the American Restoration Movement and its leaders, including Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell, Bartone Stone and others from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean whose aim was “to restore the original Christianity of the New Testament in faith, practice and structure” (18). The founders of the movement felt that the faith that was instituted in the first century church was corrupted first by the Roman Catholic Church then by the Protestant churches (19). The movement had three original aims, namely, “1) restoring primitive New Testament Christianity, 2) achieving Christian unity, and 3) bringing the world to Christ through evangelism” (46). Simply put, the three pillars are: truth, unity and evangelism. Notably, the pillars which were intended to be unifying factors in the West became divisive and this resulted in the formation of branches of the restoration movement in Malawi.

Chapter Two, “*Beginnings (1906-1930)*,” is divided into these subheadings: The Birth of Malawian Churches of Christ, Emergence of more Malawian Leaders, Years of Repression 1915-1923, Churches of Christ Suspected, The Church continues under Persecution and Years of Recovery. In this chapter, the birth of Malawian branches of

15. Musopole, *uMunthu Theology*, 14-15.
16. Augustine C. Musopole, “A Theological Vision for Malawi,” *Religion in Malawi* 6 (1996), 3-11, at 6.
17. Augustine Chingwala Musopole, “Decolonising the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age,” Annual Conference of the Theological Society of Malawi, Ekwendeni, September 2021, 7.
18. Musopole, “Decolonising the Theological Curriculum,” 11.

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## Book highlight: an excerpt from *uMunthu Theology: An Introduction* by Augustine Chingwala Musopole

### What is uMunthu Theology?<sup>1</sup>

For our purposes, theology has been defined as a reflection on the “Divine-With-Us-Ness or the With-Us-Ness-Of-God”, quite a mouthful for lack of a better term. In Chichewa/Nyanja it could be rendered *Fyoloje ya Mulungu Nafe*. In Tumbuka it would be *Fyoloje ya Uwapo wa Ciuta*, and in Ngonde it would be *Ifyoloje ya Kyala Alinuswe*. I have also described the theological activity as “a reflective life-dancing with God in the cosmos and through time. It is done for the sake of deepening our *uMunthu* and a feel for a vital relationship, meaning, and creativity in the communion of this life-dance with our God. It is celebrative reflection on our being with God. Furthermore, it is also an ontological hold on life’s end-purpose in association with Jesus, the authentic *Munthu*.” It is a celebration of our essential cosmic role, that of being priests in service of life on behalf of all creation. As I have stated elsewhere: “The aim of such a reflection is the embodiment of *uMunthu* as seen in the face of Christ in fulfillment of our creation design and priestly role in the cosmic temple on behalf of the rest of creation.”<sup>2</sup>

This is very critical in understanding the idea of *uMunthu* from a Christian theological perspective. This is radically different from one so understood from a sociological, philosophical, political, economic, and even psychological point of view in which it only describes our sinful and sub-human existential historical reality. *uMunthu* as seen in the face of Christ is the *uMunthu* before the Fall, *uMunthu* as the image and likeness of God pure and simple created after his loving being. An image obliterated by sin, but still discernible through God’s sustaining grace in our cultures. God’s grace has always been redemptive, resisting the forces of decay and death in all cultures. In Malawi, it is seen to be at work in the concepts of integrity and socio-economic responsibility and our longing for love to become a community-in-communion. It is this understanding that is at the heart of what *uMunthu* theology is all about. Now, let me delineate the nature of *uMunthu* theology.

### *uMunthu* Theology is Contextual Theology

*uMunthu* theology is an African contextual theology. It seems now to be a theological cliché to say, “All theology is contextual,” but it is a very critical saying in view of the intellectual history of the West and the oppression that it unleashed over many nations. Following on the mathematical model, it was assumed that all true knowledge was

began in Djoko-Punda. Through her teaching, we learned the smallest details of the Mennonite mission. We are now able to even give lectures in our communities on the history of the church.

The workshop presented several highlights. First, the fact of bringing together members of the three Mennonite communities among which there was a diversity of languages (ethnic groups), ages, and provinces of origin (Kasai, Kasai Oriental, Sud-Kivu, Kwilu, Kinshasa) really proved to us that we are one body in Christ Jesus. The love and unity of the group was tremendous. Comedian Papa Mihala made us burst out laughing at all times, especially during our practical work.

Secondly, the candidacy of women was very much encouraged by the organizers. We saw how much this project showed consideration towards women: there were two women professors, a female village chief<sup>64</sup>, five women out of sixteen participants, and the cooking was coordinated by women. This is the very first time that a woman was a village chief in a workshop with men and women where there were church leaders in the group. It was a very good memory for me, as village chief, to be the leader of our authorities! The women felt very valued in this workshop and cast off the inferiority complex that gnaws at us daily. Inspired by this first experience, women feel capable of assuming any responsibility in our Mennonite communities in particular and society in general.

The morning worship was another fantastic moment. The spirit of the Lord was present during our workshop and in the wonderful songs of each day. Sometimes I interrupted my teachers to wake up tired participants. God was present during our training.

In conclusion, the different lessons taught by our two teachers encouraged us to always remain Mennonite Christians in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our church leaders greatly appreciated the initiative and would like to see this workshop project on the writing of the history of the church continue. We, students, have mastered the scientific standards of this training and we are already at work in the field. We look forward to seeing our work published by the DACB.

May God bless the work of our hands.

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<sup>1</sup> This excerpt is drawn from Chapter Five of Augustine Chingwala Musopole, *uMunthu Theology: An Introduction* (Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2021), reproduced here by kind permission of the publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine Musopole, “Needed: A Theology Cooked in an African Pot,” in Klaus Fiedler et al (eds), *Theology Cooked in an African Pot*, *ATISCA BULLETIN*, No. 5/6, 1996/97, 7-47, at 24.

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<sup>64</sup> The “village chief” is a student representative and timekeeper for the instructors.

## Church History Writing Workshop for Congolese Mennonites March 20-24, 2023 - Centre Universitaire de Missiologie, Kinshasa, DR Congo

### A personal report by Charly Ntumba Malembe

Initiated by Anicka Fast, Doctor of Theology, the Workshop on Writing Church History for Congolese Mennonites, held from March 20 to 24, 2023 at the Centre Universitaire Missiologique in Kinshasa, is the very first initiative of its kind in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The selection of the sixteen participants (including two assistants) was based on a points system whereby the best candidates—from a total of 40 applications—were chosen. For my part, when I received the registration forms, I hesitated to apply. But an inner voice kept reminding me every day: “Go ahead, Charly, who knows? Maybe you will be selected. I was among the last, maybe even the very last one, to apply. The day Dr. Anicka contacted me to tell me the good news, I cried tears of joy.

The purpose of this workshop was to develop the talents of Congolese writers and historians by equipping them with the necessary tools to write the biographies of the Mennonites (men and women) who contributed to the emergence of the Mennonite Church in the DR Congo. Produced by two eminent teachers, Dr. Anicka Fast (worker with Mennonite Mission Network) and Dr. Michèle Sigg (executive director of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* or DACB, [www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org)), in collaboration with Maurice Matsitsa of the Lay Protestant Ministry (MILAPRO) of the CEFMC, the workshop received financial and logistical support from several organizations including the Schowalter Foundation, the CUM, Mama Makeka House of Hope (MMHH), the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM). The result was a collaboration between Congolese Mennonite churches (CMCo, CEFMC, and CEM).

The workshop began with an opening worship service led by Reverend Matwala. The speaker, the Rev. Mupepe, provincial representative of the 4th CEFMC, city of Kinshasa, delivered the opening remarks and praised the initiative. He was preceded by the Rev. Vunda Michel, provincial representative of the CMCO. Mr. Maurice Matsitsa, coordinator and one of the participants, introduced the church officials.

To begin the program, Dr. Michèle told us the story of Lydie Mengwelune (1886-1966, Cameroon)—a powerful testimony in the DACB that inspired us to pay attention to the other pioneers in our manual. Her presentation on the ancient and medieval church in Africa shed light on a little-known chapter in our history. It was the very first time that we learned that there were also black pioneers, both men and women, in the establishment of Christianity in Africa.

As for Dr. Anicka Fast, the story of the Mennonite Church attracted a lot of attention from the participants, the majority of whom still knew that the first mission

universal and objective. It was assumed also that there was only one logical system and Aristotle had had the last word on it. However, the universality of Christian theology is not a mathematical one, but rather an anthropological and existential one since theology is done for humanity, and that it is also always contextual. Its universality is rooted in its locality and not the other way round.

Shoki Coe (1914-88) of Taiwan is credited with bringing the concept of contextualization into the ecumenical debate when he was Director of the Theological Education Fund at the World Council of Churches (WCC).<sup>3</sup> Theology has not always been contextual. Having been modeled on mathematical models, it was thought that it was universal like mathematics. In the statement of Vincent of Lerins, it was “what all men have at all times and everywhere believed” to be true.<sup>4</sup> This gave rise to dogmatic theology which was treated as if its assertions were theorems to be applied in the solving of theological and ethical problems as governed by Aristotelian categories and logic. This attitude held sway for a long time. However, consequent to political liberation, the Third World has irrupted and demanded a place in the theological sun to also think through for itself its relation with God within its own existential, cultural and historical contexts. This demand has touched on the relationship of the particular expression of theology and its universality. The two are not separate realities, but coincide and co-exist with each other dialectically.

### **uMunthu Theology is a Relational Theology**

*uMunthu* theology is a relational theology in which God is understood only in relation to humanity and all creation; and humanity also is understood only in relation to God and the rest of creation. It is this relationship that constitutes the matrix of *uMunthu* theology. It is a spiritual relationship rooted in mutual love. John Calvin captured this insight when he wrote: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>5</sup>

It is the relationship between the two that is critical to any sound theology. Furthermore, it is the understanding of humanity as manifested in the face of Christ that makes such a reflection possible. In other words, it is the *uMunthu* of Jesus that makes *uMunthu* theology possible. Jesus is the divine human face of God, but also the divine face of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Again, allow me to quote what I have written elsewhere,

It is *uMunthu* as manifested in Jesus the Christ, that can, I believe, unlock for Malawians (read Africans) a theological understanding that is

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<sup>3</sup> See Shoki Coe, “Contextualization as the Way Towards Reform,” in Douglas E. Elwood (ed), *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980,) 48-55.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent of Lerins lived in the fifth century in France. He was semi-Peagian in his beliefs. He died in 445 CE.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 35.

<sup>6</sup> See John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).

culturally relevant, evangelically life-giving, and politically, not only challenging, but empowering and transforming.<sup>7</sup>

The target of the Gospel as both revelation and redemption is the restoration of *uMunthu* that was lost at the Fall, that is, that turned into a beast of prey with a human face for its mask. The human being plays the hypocrite. The word hypocrite was Jesus' concrete definition of the essential nature of sin. A hypocrite lacks integrity, is not genuine, and lives a lie. A hypocrite does not live out one's life, but only performs a show. As a beast of prey, humanity is destructive of other lives, lives on the blood of others, and sacrifices others for its own survival. The symbolic beast of prey in most African cultures is the hyena—ugly, dirty, vicious, scavenger, and dangerous. The symbolic figure of evil is the witch because they are believed to feed on human flesh and blood. Therefore, *uMunthu* needs to be restored to its original glory because under sin humanity keeps falling short of that glory, the glory now seen in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Under sin, humanity is *subjected* to sub-human existence and so also its *uMunthu*. This means a failure to live in accordance with the Creator's designed purpose and ends—a loving fellowship and communion in the cosmos. Sin breaks down relationships. Human history is a history of broken personal, social, political, economic, religious, and cultural relationships. Sin makes each one a contradiction, that is, unable to relate to one-self genuinely leading to lying to oneself. By making each one autonomous, sin only gets each human being totally enslaved by their self-serving ends. Human autonomy under sin is an illusion since only God's love can constitute our true freedom, and freedom severed from God's love is a sham. Therefore, *uMunthu* theology is relational—with self, with others, with creation, and with Creator.

### **uMunthu Theology is Biblical**

*uMunthu* theology is biblical in that it takes the Bible as its primary and most important source for doing theology and that at the heart of biblical revelation is the relationship between God and humanity. This is seen in creation and the election of humanity over all other creatures, the fall of humanity, the election of Israel over all other nations, the incarnation and the election of Jesus over all other heavenly beings, and redemption by the cross over all other means. The central biblical question is that of humanity's reality and plight.

It is often asked, "How can the Bible be a book for Africans since it is a foreign document, and was used by colonialists to hoodwink the Africans in order to grab their land and resources?" This question is not genuinely asked since there are many things that have come from elsewhere that have been adopted by Africans for their use and also abuse. Whoever asks such a question is often myopic in their self-understanding and failing to appreciate our interdependence in the world. No civilization has progressed on its own, but always by adapting and adopting ways from other

qu'il y avait aussi des pionniers noirs, hommes et femmes, dans l'implantation du christianisme en Afrique.

Quant au Dr. Anicka Fast, l'histoire de l'Église mennonite au Congo a beaucoup attiré l'attention des participants dont la majorité savaient toujours que la première mission a débuté à Djoko-Punda. Grâce à son enseignement, nous avons appris les moindres détails de cette histoire. Nous sommes capables maintenant de tenir même des conférences dans nos communautés sur l'histoire de l'église.

L'atelier a présenté plusieurs points forts. D'abord, le fait de réunir les membres des trois communautés mennonites parmi lesquelles il y avait une diversité de langues (groupes ethniques), d'âges, et de provinces de provenance (Kasai, Kasai Oriental, Sud-Kivu, Kwilu, Kinshasa) nous a réellement prouvé que nous sommes un seul corps en Jésus-Christ. L'amour et l'unité du groupe étaient formidables. L'humouriste Papa Mihala nous faisait éclater de rire à tout moment surtout lors de nos travaux pratiques.

Deuxièmement, la candidature des femmes était très encouragée par les organisatrices. Nous avons vu la considération de ce projet envers les femmes : il y avait deux femmes enseignantes, une cheftaine du village<sup>63</sup>, cinq femmes sur seize participants, et la cuisine était coordonnée par les femmes. C'est la toute première fois qu'une femme soit cheftaine du village dans un atelier mixte où il y avait des autorités ecclésiastiques dans le groupe. C'était un très bon souvenir pour moi, la cheftaine, de diriger même nos autorités! Les femmes se sont senties très valorisées dans cet atelier et sont sorties du complexe d'infériorité qui nous ronge quotidiennement. Inspirées par cette première expérience, les femmes se sentent capables d'assumer n'importe quelle responsabilité dans nos communautés mennonites en particulier et la société en général.

Le culte matinal était un autre moment fantastique. L'esprit du Seigneur était présent durant notre atelier et dans les merveilleux chants de chaque jour. Parfois, j'interrompais mes enseignantes pour animer les participants fatigués. Dieu était au rendez-vous durant notre formation.

En conclusion, les différentes leçons dispensées par nos deux enseignantes nous ont encouragé à demeurer toujours des chrétiens mennonites au service du Seigneur Jésus-Christ. Nos autorités ecclésiastiques ont beaucoup apprécié l'initiative et souhaitent la continuité de ce projet d'atelier sur l'écriture de l'histoire de l'église. Nous, les participants, nous avons bien maîtrisé les normes scientifiques de cette formation et nous sommes déjà à l'œuvre sur le terrain. Nous anticipons avec impatience de voir nos œuvres publiées par la maison d'édition Langham et dans DIBICA.

Que Dieu bénisse le travail de nos mains.

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine Musopole, "Needed: Theology Cooked in an African Pot," 23.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 3:23; John 1:14.

<sup>63</sup> Le "chef du village" est le représentant de la classe qui aide les enseignants à être pontuels.



## Atelier sur l'Écriture de l'Histoire de l'Église à l'intention des mennonites congolais du 20 au 24 mars 2023 Centre Universitaire Missiologique, Kinshasa, RD Congo

### Un rapport personnel par Charly Ntumba Malembe<sup>62</sup>

Initié par Anicka Fast, docteure en théologie, l'Atelier sur l'Écriture de l'Histoire de l'Église à l'intention des mennonites congolais, tenu du 20 au 24 mars 2023 au Centre Universitaire Missiologique à Kinshasa, est la toute première initiative de ce genre en République Démocratique du Congo.

La sélection des seize participants (dont deux assistants) était basée sur un système de points selon lequel les meilleurs candidats—parmi un total de 40 demandes—étaient choisis. Pour ma part, quand j'ai reçu les formulaires d'inscription, j'avais hésité à postuler. Mais une voix intérieure ne cessait de me rappeler chaque jour : « Vas-y, Charly, qui sait? Peut-être que tu seras sélectionnée. » J'étais parmi les derniers, peut-être même la dernière, à envoyer ma candidature. Le jour où Dr. Anicka m'a contactée pour me dire la bonne nouvelle, j'ai pleuré des larmes de joie.

Le but de cet atelier était de développer les talents d'écrivains et d'historiens congolais en les équipant avec les outils nécessaires pour écrire les biographies des mennonites (hommes et femmes) qui ont contribué à l'émergence de l'Église mennonite en RD Congo. Réalisé par deux éminentes enseignantes, Dr. Anicka Fast (ouvrière avec Mennonite Mission Network) et Dr. Michèle Sigg (directrice exécutive du *Dictionnaire Biographique des Chrétiens d'Afrique* ou DIBICA, [www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org)), en collaboration avec Maurice Matsitsa du Ministère Laïc Protestant (MILAPRO) de la CEFMC, l'atelier a bénéficié d'un soutien financier et logistique de plusieurs organisations dont la Fondation Schowalter, le CUM, Mama Makeka House of Hope (MMHH), le Comité central mennonite (MCC) et Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM). Le résultat a été une collaboration entre églises mennonites congolaises (CMCo, CEFMC, et CEM).

L'atelier a commencé avec un culte d'ouverture où le révérend Matwala a officié. L'orateur, le Rév. Mupepe, représentant provincial de la CEFMC pour la ville de Kinshasa, a prononcé le mot d'ouverture et a loué l'initiative. Il était précédé par le Rév. Vunda Michel, représentant provincial de la CMCo. Monsieur Maurice Matsitsa, coordinateur et l'un des participants, a présenté les autorités ecclésiastiques.

Pour commencer le programme, Dr. Michèle nous a raconté l'histoire de Lydie Mengwelune (1886-1966, Cameroun)—un témoignage puissant dans le DIBICA qui nous a inspiré à prêter attention aux autres pionniers dans notre manuel. Sa présentation sur l'église primitive et médiévale en Afrique a jeté de la lumière sur un chapitre peu connu de notre histoire. C'était la toute première fois qu'on apprenait

civilizations to their own traditions of wisdom, but not by giving up own their own traditions of wisdom which sometimes Christianity has demanded. Both the Bible and Jesus come to fulfill those traditions of wisdom.

Furthermore, it is not so much the book that is important, but rather the God to whom the book bears witness. The biblical God is the Living God, the I AM, creator of heaven and earth who in Jesus Christ has touched African hearts and brought them into the experience of his own life of love. It is this experience and testimony that has persuaded Africans to relate in a living manner with this God and hence the adoption of the Bible as their own book too.

The Bible is a testimonial book on life in and with God. Had the Bible been written as a philosophy book, like Plato's Republic, it would only impact a few, but as testimony to a living God, its impact continues to be felt as it is promoted by the Spirit of the living God. It has been elected and ordained by God to reveal who God is. What St Paul says about his ministry, can also be applied to the Bible:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.<sup>9</sup>

The Bible too may be regarded as a jar of clay, but the power in it is from God. Just taste and see. It is this Bible that informs *uMunthu* theology based on the "WITH-US-NESS OF GOD" in history, in Christ, in the hope of everlasting life, and in our cultures.

### **uMunthu Theology is Christological**

*uMunthu* theology is Christ-centred since we have defined *uMunthu* as quality of being human as seen in the face of Christ, full of grace and truth. The writer to the Hebrews introduces his epistle with the following words, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."<sup>10</sup>

Then he goes on to say,

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.<sup>11</sup>

The incarnation is a key factor in *uMunthu* theology. God makes his love known by becoming human. As if this was not sufficient, Jesus calls himself "Son of Man." Now much ink has been used to explain this enigmatic title that Jesus used for himself and why he might have chosen to use it. I will not go into that discussion here, but simply give what I consider to be the case.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:7.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 2:14,15.

<sup>62</sup> Charly était une participante et la cheftaine du village pendant l'atelier.

The synoptic gospels give us two titles that referred to Jesus, namely, “Son of God” and “Son of Man.” It can be said without any sense of contradiction that the title “Son of God” was used by others in reference to Jesus, while the title “Son of Man” was exclusively used by Jesus to apply to himself as a substitute for the “I” or “I am” that we find in the gospel of John. My argument is that such titles should neither be understood biologically nor metaphorically, but rather linguistically. There is a style of saying in which identity is given in a metaphor used. For instance, Barnabas meaning “Son of encouragement,” or Boanerges, the nickname given to James and John for their hot temper meaning “Sons of thunder.” It does not mean that in both cases that their fathers were Mr Encouragement and Mr Thunder respectively, but rather that they had the characteristic of being a source of encouragement to others and of being hot-tempered respectively. The same goes for “Son of Righteousness” or “Sons of Peace.” Therefore, both “Son of God” and “Son of Man” should be seen in this light as characteristics that Jesus manifested. The two titles imply each other and perhaps have little to do with the same expressions found in the Old Testament in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel. Since Jesus was authentically human – full of grace and truth – he was able to manifest the glory of God which those who saw him acknowledged and, therefore, called him “Son of God” or someone with divine qualities. For Jesus, he told them that what they saw and acknowledged as divinity in him was what authentic humanity was all about. When we are authentically human, that is, full of grace and truth, the divine glory also shows since God is made manifest in and through us. The failure to link these two due to the influence of Greek thinking about matter as evil has been responsible for the many heresies in the church.

### **uMunthu Theology is Evangelical**

The *uMunthu* theology is evangelical rooted in the incarnation which was a divine project of re-humanization since sin had turned humanity into a beast with a human face. Sin made humanity less than human and oriented humanity towards animality over which group of creatures he was meant to have managerial authority. The good news had to do with the reversal of that trend and the restoration of authentic humanity reflecting the original image of God. This is why M. M. Thomas, the pre-eminent Indian lay-theologian and one time Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, has described salvation as humanization. It is, therefore, not an accident of identity that Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, meaning one who embodied humanity authentically as the gospels of John presents him, a humanity that was full of grace and truth, and also that fully reflected the glory of God. The re-humanization project was captured by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal child who returned home which he left to be alone and free only to fall victim of wickedness leading to being a fugitive. He came to his senses and decided to return home with this confession, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer

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worthy to be called your son.” To this his Father responded, “Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.”<sup>12</sup>

### **uMunthu Theology is Liberational and Inculturational**

The gospel of John states, “To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free... If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”<sup>13</sup>

This message of freedom is echoed by the gospel of Luke where Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and applies the reading to himself,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.<sup>14</sup>

To this might be added what Jesus said about himself, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus is the one who sets people free the moment they choose to be his disciples for that is the reason for which he came. Being the embodiment of truth, he teaches the truth by which liberation comes and blindness is dispelled. The truth leads us to know what authentic humanness is, to which he then restores us so as to truly realize ourselves. Therefore, *uMunthu* theology is against everything that oppresses, exploits, and dominates as it champions just and loving relationship in all aspects of life – family, political, social, economic, gender, and spiritual or religious. It places humanity at the centre of all cosmic relations just as Jesus placed even the Sabbath at the disposal of a humanity and not as it was before.

Furthermore, by being restored to our home culture, everything falls into place since all the contradictions and falsehoods are removed. We become disciples of authentic living, full of grace and truth, and begin to reflect the glory of God from which we were falling as St Paul puts it.<sup>16</sup> The culture to which we are restored is the culture of love and of speaking the truth in love.

It is a love that passes all rational knowledge, and is possible only through faith. It is a culture that the gospel of Matthew captures for us in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>17</sup> Jesus restores not only our lives and humanity, but also our cultures and worldviews by fulfilling them to their original divine intention and purpose. We have already asserted that *uMunthu* is at the heart of our worldview as an ideal for socialization or being human in the world, but one which under sin, we fail to achieve. Therefore, *uMunthu* theology is both liberational and inculturational by making Jesus Christ to be

<sup>12</sup> Luke 15:21, 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> John 8:31, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>15</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 5:1-7:29.

incarnate through the agency of the Holy Spirit thus fulfilling our traditional view of *uMunthu* through his authentic *uMunthu*, and in this way setting us free to be ourselves.

### **uMunthu Theology is a Transformational Theology**

Professor Jesse Mugambi has championed the theology of reconstruction as the successor to the theology of liberation and inculturation.<sup>18</sup> He has done this by replacing the exodus paradigm of “Let my people go” as related to liberation with that of Nehemiah of “come and let us rebuild”, as related to the current need of reconstructing our societies. He finds in the ministry of Jesus one who focuses on reconstructions of individuals, families, communities, and societies at large as found in the Sermon on the Mount. This is also true of St Paul in and through his missionary journeys and his epistles to the churches that he established. However, both liberation and reconstruction are on-going political tasks, but they need to be founded on human transformation through repentance. This is where Jesus began his proclamation of the eminence of the reign of God which he came, so to speak, to reconstruct.

Therefore, *uMunthu* theology insist on the transformation of humanity in all aspects of human existence. It is the corrupt person who corrupts the world. The global financial crisis that started in 2007 has been traced to greed on Wall Street, New York, USA. Under sin, life and culture are corrupted, and so too our thinking and acting. Jesus came to change all this in order that the fullness of life in all its glory may flow freely to the glory of God. Human development is a historical pre-occupation of all nations and peoples, and yet for many, such development only brings with it more disappointments and misery as they are being exploited, oppressed, denied opportunities in life, marginalized, and dominated. It brings no blessedness with it, but leads to fighting over limited resources, suffering, and early deaths. It is more often than not a development that is based on injustices, breaking of human rights, and corrupt practices. Blessed development is based on righteousness, that is, right relationships and right dealings in all aspects of human life.<sup>19</sup> However, this cannot be realized without human transformation, and that starts from the human heart. The law can only reveal evil and condemn it, but cannot transform the human heart. Only God in Christ can do that. Education has no power of changing the human heart since it is not only the ignorant and uneducated that are corrupt, but the very educated using their social networks who know how to manipulate systems to their advantage in order to circumvent the law. It is the Church, when it has itself resisted the temptation to be corrupted, that has been bequeathed this awesome responsibility of proclaiming the message of human transformation. It is the Holy Spirit, power of the gospel, that transforms the human heart and restores people to the values of the kingdom of God. In a critical appraisal of Jesse Mugambi's theology of reconstruction, Julius Gathogo writes,

<sup>18</sup> See Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Proverbs 14:34.

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missiologial thinking where much emphasis is laid on the question of center and margins.<sup>60</sup> Whereas mission was once understood as a movement from powerful centers aiming to reach out to those on the periphery, today it is increasingly appreciated that initiative in mission most often lies with the marginalized. As the World Council of Churches *Together Towards Life* mission affirmation states, “People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the center, is out of view.”<sup>61</sup> Discovering and articulating such a view from the margins has been an academic vocation for Klaus Fiedler. And perhaps it is a vocation that stretches beyond the academic to embrace the pastoral and the evangelical. For Jesus, as we read in the Gospels, had a strong orientation to the outsiders – those who, for one reason or another, had been excluded. It is their perspectives that have been privileged in the work of Klaus Fiedler, one indication that he has lived his life and fulfilled his vocation as a follower of Christ.

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<sup>61</sup> *Together towards Life*, §38.

...from an evangelical perspective, Mugambi appears to overemphasize “social reconstruction” over that of “individual reconstruction.” Understanding social reconstruction as a panacea for all ills of Africa without tackling the issue of personal responsibility and radical change of the individual, may, if unchecked, lead to the weakening of the Christian gospel.<sup>20</sup>

St Paul, who by God's grace escaped the corrupting temptation of religion, wrote that if anyone is in Christ Jesus, they are a new creation. The old sinful nature is now gone and the new human nature comes to them.<sup>21</sup> This is possible through God's power of reconciling sinful humanity to himself. Then he goes on to declare, “And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”<sup>22</sup>

The Church's task is to implore all humanity on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God, to oneself, to all others, and to the environment, so as to experience the new transformation that brings about the new humanity after the image of Christ on the one hand, and leads to blessed development on the other. It is this ontological transformation that leads to transformation of the mind, of conduct, and of action. It is this transformation that transforms the social, economic, and political structures of society. The early church had such an impact on society so that its enemies complained that they had turned the world upside down. Their message was one of transformed *uMunthu* as found in Christ Jesus, that is, a new humanity, and when that was received, transformed societies in turn. This agrees with the biblical insights that righteousness exalts a nation while sin brings down any people. This is the challenge to the Church in the 21st century in Africa of taking the transforming message to the to the continent and the world. Only in this manner can the tides of corruption, ethnocentrism, sexism, racism, and other ills be arrested in their stride.

### uMunthu Theology is Missiologial

God's mission is one of the humanization and re-humanization of the world through love, in love, with love and for love. It is rooted in creation where in love and for love God creates the entire universe. The crown of that creation is humanity as made in God's own image and likeness. Humanity is the face of creation and has a high priestly role on behalf of all creation, a role that Jesus Christ assumes and perfectly fulfills according to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Furthermore, this mission was also given over to the disciples of Christ when Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Julius Gothogo, “Post-Liberation Theology: A Critical Appreciation,” in Isaac Mwase and Eunice Kamaara (eds), *Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2012), 84.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>22</sup> 2 Corinthians 5: 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> John 12:21-23.

This is an awesome responsibility placed on the shoulders of redeemed humanity even under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. However, the judgment to forgive or not forgive would be prompted by the Holy Spirit whose task it would be to judge the world. It is not an arbitrary vindictive responsibility, but one rooted in grace and truth, the basic characteristics of our authentic humanness. St John states:

But I tell you the truth; it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment, in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world stands condemned.<sup>24</sup>

The Christian mission has its root in the very heart of God and its purpose was to spread love in the world so as to create a civilization of love and a culture of abundant life accord to Pope John-Paul II. Only love can usher in abundant life. Under sin, humanity starves for love, and what it calls love are only its truncated forms that are devoid of life, hence the human cry for love in and through our marriages, communities, pop culture, movies, novels, and theatre. Love is a gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> Without the Holy Spirit, we do not know how to love and mission becomes impossible. Therefore, it follows from all this that *uMunthu* theology with its *uMunthu* mission is rooted in the very Trinitarian nature of God and works within the wisdom of God to realize authentic love and, therefore, abundant life.

### **uMunthu Theology is both Liberal and Conservative**

One of the ugliest aspects of theology has been the conflict between liberal and conservative wings since the time of the Enlightenment; the conflict between the Protestant and the Roman Catholic wing since the Reformation; the Orthodox and non-Orthodox wings since the first century. Over the centuries these conflicts have been sustained to the present day even though not with same intensity. This is the case because sin has made us separate love from truth. We have fought intellectual battles without love out of our imposed theological ghettos. *uMunthu* theology finds these divisions to be distortions of the gospel that restores *uMunthu*. Since love and truth are as extensive as God is, no one group has a complete view of both, but all of us are born again to grow into love and truth, and as St. Paul has put it, “to be filled to the measure of the fullness of God”. However, instead of growing and being filled to such a measure, we have fought physically and intellectually, vilified each other, competed with each other while our *uMunthu* suffered diminution and decay and so too our witness.

Liberalism is viable only against a conservative past upon which its own security hangs. In other words, liberalism and conservatism should be considered not in

on to demonstrate the positive qualities that these missions and churches brought to Malawi. Under his influence it became a feature of the book that it, “refrains from doctrinal judgments, so that there are no ‘dominant’ or ‘right’ churches. Rather, Roman Catholics, Free Methodists, Zionists and the Last Church of God and His Christ are all described on the same level, and the assessment of their respective Christian qualities is left to the reader.”<sup>57</sup>

Another “left field” endeavor in our Malawi Church History project was a determination to retrieve and highlight the role of women in the making of Malawian Christianity. This was a concern that for many years had been close to Fiedler’s heart. One straightforward way of proceeding was to include an entire chapter devoted to the distinctive contribution of women. Klaus led with this, examining Women in the Ordained Ministry, The Calling to the Religious Life, *Mayibusa* (pastors’ wives), and Women’s Organizations.<sup>58</sup> He also led with a conscious attempt to include as many women as possible in the boxed quotations and case studies which are a feature of the book. Likewise, when it came to selection of pictures to illustrate the book, we often set aside the famous photographs of the male leaders of missions and churches in favour of little-known photographs of the women who were involved. In regard to Blantyre Mission, for example, we included no photograph of David Clement Scott or Alexander Hetherwick, but there are two pictures of Elizabeth Pithie (later Hetherwick), one as a young widow teaching some girls and the other from her later years.<sup>59</sup> Out of several candidates to become the front cover photo the one that secured the place is a photograph that features Malawian schoolgirls in the foreground and the celebrated missionaries (including D.C. Scott) in the background. When it came to pioneering missionaries, we set aside the “classic” pictures that show a masterful male alongside his demure wife. For example, for the Churches of Christ in the north we have no picture of John and Ann Thiesen but rather one of Ann going to a women’s Bible study carrying her little son Mark (who later completed a PhD under Fiedler’s supervision at Mzuzu University). This is what you see when you come out of left field! Klaus regarded the Malawi church history textbook as the “crowning glory” of his scholarship, crystallizing all that he had learned through research, postgraduate supervision and academic publishing.

### **Viewing from the Margins**

Good academic work depends on originality, on finding fresh angles from which to consider sometimes familiar evidence. The “left field” approach favored by Klaus Fiedler has served him well in scholarship since he has often been able to bring a fresh angle of analysis to the scholarly debate. He also finds himself in tune with current

<sup>24</sup> John 16:7-11

<sup>25</sup> Romans 5:5

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, “Decolonizing Malawi Church History: The Making of a Textbook,” in Felix Nyika, Mzee Hermann Y. Mvula and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age*, Zomba: TSM Press, forthcoming 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History 1860-2020*, 396-413.

<sup>59</sup> Ross and Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History*, 56, 58.

scholarship. Fiedler recognized that these churches and related movements nonetheless had a significant history that invited original research. His affirmation was encouraging to initially hesitant students and several went on to complete their degrees and even to develop their dissertations for publication, a move always encouraged by Fiedler. In total, he supervised 35 successful PhDs and 18 Masters dissertations.

During the late 1990s, one of his postgraduate students Rachel Banda (née Gondwe) came to be more than a student and they were married in 2001. They made their home in Zomba at first but when Rachel was offered a Faculty position at the recently founded Mzuzu University in 2008, and Klaus had retired from Chancellor College at age 65, they decided to relocate to Mzuzu, 700 km to the north and not far from Rachel's home area. It was no leisurely retirement ahead for Klaus, however, since soon after arrival he too was recruited by Mzuzu University as Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, taking up a chair he was to occupy for the next 12 years. True to form, it was not long before he was taking a leading role in the development of postgraduate studies at the young University and shouldering responsibility to start its publishing house, Mzuni Press. The new University Press did not take long to establish itself as the most prolific academic publisher in the country. Particularly through its collaboration with the Oxford-based African Books Collective, it also enjoyed growing international exposure. With his next "retirement" on the horizon, Klaus took the decision in 2016 to start yet another publishing house, Luviri Press, with the idea that he might continue to do what he loves best when his formal University service was concluded. However, when he retired from Mzuzu University in 2020, he was asked to continue running Mzuni Press until succession arrangements could be made. Hence, he ended up being at the helm of two publishing houses in his "retirement."

During 2020 I had an opportunity to view Fiedler's "left field" approach at close hand. The two of us happened to be near neighbours in Zomba when the coronavirus first struck in March of that year. The suddenly altered conditions presented us with an opportunity to work together at pace on a project that had been slowly germinating in our minds – the creation of a textbook to support the teaching of Malawi church history. We met every two or three days, always washing hands and observing social distance as required in the context of Covid-19. On each occasion we brought some new draft text to work on together until, by July 2020, we had a complete manuscript, 28 chapters and 500 pages, including a specially commissioned set of maps and many photographs. As we attempted to take a comprehensive approach, an understanding quickly developed that I would lead with the "mainline" churches while Klaus would lead with what he wryly called the "offline" churches. I vividly remember his delight when he came one day with a draft titled "Missions 'Non-Descript' and 'Native Controlled'," which ultimately became Chapter 9 of the book.<sup>56</sup> These were the pejorative terms used by colonial officials to describe missions that did not fit the mold to which they were accustomed. Fiedler gloried in the derogatory language and went

oppositional terms, but rather in relational terms as two sides of the same historical reality. Furthermore, the liberalism of today is the conservatism of tomorrow or the conservatism of today was the liberalism of yesterday with slight differences. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two upon which change is based. Therefore, both status quo and free-wheeling liberalism cannot secure the meaning of human existence, but rather only a wise adjustment of each to the other. What is lacking on both sides is love and wisdom beyond their prejudiced rational arguments. Change for the sake of change in total disregard of people's weaknesses and security and without loving concern is destructive folly. Unfortunately, this wisdom is often lacking in the pursuit of both and the resulting progress is both erratic and painful and often harmful to many. Revolutions happen at the expense of human life even though they are carried out in the name of human freedom and security. Take for instance the Industrial Revolution of Britain, Communist Revolution in the Soviet Union, Cambodia under Khmer Rouge, Rwandan Genocide, Cultural Revolution in China, to name a few. In their rational pursuit, they lacked both love and wisdom, and result was massive loss of human life at the altar of egoistic ideologies.

It is no wonder Jesus warned as he spoke about the value of the law,

Anyone who *breaks* one of the least of these commandments and *teaches* others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever *practices* and *teaches* these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness *surpasses* that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (read the ideologues), you will certainly not *enter* the kingdom of heaven (read a truly re-humanized state of life, truth and love).<sup>26</sup>

*uMunthu* theology being relational, considers liberalism and conservatism is relational and not oppositional terms. They define each other since they are depended on each other. While liberalism seeks freedom, conservatism celebrates practical and tried truths based on wisdom, and both must work for change that serves all humanity better and not just a few based on partial viewpoints and economic and political self-interest, but rather on wisdom and abundant life.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History 1860-2020*, Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2020, 147-63.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:19-20.

## Introducing Two Living Theologians

### Isabel Apawo Phiri: Centering the Voices of Women in Africa<sup>27</sup>

By 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 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

sexual relationships. Not Fiedler! A provocative article addressed the question of condom use on a theological basis.<sup>51</sup> This was soon followed by “Compulsory HIV Testing: A Christian Imperative.”<sup>52</sup> Healing is another controversial area in Malawian Christianity, with few daring to make a theological assessment of the claims made by healers. Fiedler stepped into this area with a discriminating approach that allowed for miraculous healing but also concluded that most claims are fake.<sup>53</sup> Always on the lookout for those who have been overlooked and despised, another typical Fiedler study was on “A Revival Disregarded and Disliked.”<sup>54</sup> The themes vary but what they have in common is their orientation to the underdog, the scorned, the despised and the vulnerable.

When it came to publishing, here too Fiedler came “out of left field.” While other academics, even if they were Africanists, would aim to publish in the prestigious journals or with the well-respected University presses of Europe and America, Klaus took a different path. He brought to the Department at Chancellor College in Zomba a profound passion for publishing. The Department was already oriented in this direction, having begun with the simple roneo (mimeograph) production of the *Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi* from the 1970s and having launched its own journal *Religion in Malawi* in 1987. Under the fresh inspiration brought by Fiedler it embarked in 1995 on a major project to publish full-length books. The Kachere Series was born and was soon publishing several books each year. It has recently been recognized by Jessica Johnson as, “a local publishing outlet that is unique in the region outside South Africa.”<sup>55</sup> With Fiedler as editor-in-chief, it soon developed a “left field” approach. While some of its titles fell within the expected range of such a publisher, others carried a surprise factor as Fiedler had a knack of discovering little-regarded authors, overlooked subjects and neglected manuscripts. Later he took the same approach when he led new publishing initiatives at Mzuni Press (2008) and at Luviri Press (2016), which further extended the range of academic literature being made available in Malawi. At the last count, 83 books have been published in the Kachere Series, 60 by Mzuni Press and 52 by Luviri Press.

His students too often came from “left field.” Many of them came from the smaller Evangelical churches that had been neglected and marginalized in mainstream

<sup>51</sup> Klaus Fiedler, “The Moralities of Condom Use: Theological Considerations,” *Religion in Malawi* 13 (2006), 32–37.

<sup>52</sup> Klaus Fiedler, “Compulsory HIV Testing: A Christian Imperative,” *Religion in Malawi* 14 (2007), 33–39.

<sup>53</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *Fake Healing Claims for HIV and AIDS in Malawi: Traditional, Christian and Scientific*, Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Klaus Fiedler, “‘A Revival Disregarded and Disliked’ or What do Seventh-day Adventists, Churches of Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church have in Common?” *Religion in Malawi* 15 (2009), 10–19; revised as: Klaus Fiedler, “A Revival Disregarded and Disliked,” in Klaus Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity: Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi*, Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2015, 300–21.

<sup>55</sup> Jessica Johnson, “Malawi: Taking Stock in Turbulent Times,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46/2 (2020), 195–207, at 195 n5.

<sup>27</sup> This article was originally published under the same title in *Challenging Bias Against Women Academics in Religion*, ed. by Colleen D. Hartung (Chicago: Atla Open Press, 2021). Reprinted with permission.



Meanwhile, he turned his attention to a religious movement that was even further from the mainstream. The Jehovah's Witnesses are controversial at an ecclesial level since they do not regard themselves as a Christian church and some of their beliefs are considered heretical by many of the other churches. Besides the ecclesial question of whether or not they can be considered "Christian," the harsh persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses during the one-party era (1964-94) in Malawi made this an even more sensitive subject. Malawi's reputation as peace-loving country with high ethical standards did not sit easily with the egregious abuse of their human rights that was suffered by the Jehovah's Witnesses during the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda. These factors, which might deter many researchers, had the opposite effect on Klaus Fiedler. From 1994 to 1996 the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Chancellor College participated in a worldwide process of reflection initiated by the World Council of Churches Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation) under the title "Theology of Life." One of the affirmations around which this process revolved was that: "All Exercise of Power is Accountable to God." It was on this that the Department was invited to concentrate its study process. Members of the Department took up a variety of case studies that could shed light on this theme. Fiedler decided to research the experience of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The resultant essay, "Power at the Receiving End: the Jehovah's Witnesses' Experience in One-Party Malawi," provided an authoritative account and assessment, which has been frequently cited and discussed during the subsequent years.<sup>47</sup>

## Research and Publishing

When it comes to research on religion there are certain topics that are marked "don't-go-there." These were the ones that particularly appealed to Fiedler. He was comfortable in the territory "where angels fear to tread." Once he had completed his research, he had a penchant for presenting it with a slightly cheeky, irreverent and provocative title, e.g. "The 'Smaller' Churches and Big Government,"<sup>48</sup> or "Even in the Church the Exercise of Power is Accountable to God."<sup>49</sup> Another title that raised eyebrows was, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage, Abolish Church Weddings."<sup>50</sup> In the Malawi context, many theologians would hesitate to be drawn into discussion of

<sup>47</sup> Klaus Fiedler, "Power at the Receiving End: the Jehovah's Witnesses Experience in One-Party Malawi," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, repr. Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2018, 149-76.

<sup>48</sup> Klaus Fiedler, "The 'Smaller' Churches and Big Government," in Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, Gweru: Mambo-Kachere, 1995, 153-70.

<sup>49</sup> Klaus Fiedler, "Even in the Church the Exercise of Power is Accountable to God," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996, repr. Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2018, 187-224.

<sup>50</sup> Klaus Fiedler, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage, Abolish Church Weddings," *Religion in Malawi* 5 (1995), 22-27, revised in Klaus Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity: Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi*, Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2015, 6-21.

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 Lilongwe. 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 Assemblies 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 2007a, 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

Mission, was the introduction to Malawi of “the monstrous anarchy of Christendom.”<sup>41</sup> When Booth began to pay relatively high wages to his workers, criticise the (in his view) overly comfortable Blantyre Mission and to question the British colonial rule that was just coming into place, he was marked out by his compatriots as a troublemaker. He has been remembered in history chiefly because of the action of his protégé John Chilembwe in leading the “Native Rising” of 1915. Thus, Booth featured prominently in George Shepperson and Thomas Price’s classic study *Independent African*.<sup>42</sup>

Fiedler, however, reckoned that there was more to be done on the role of the “maverick” missionary (does it take one to know one?). Booth too was a Baptist and very much an outsider in the Malawi of the 1890s. Soon Fiedler had work underway to prepare a new edition of Booth’s remarkable 1897 tract *Africa for the African*.<sup>43</sup> He then discovered that Booth’s great-grandson, the historian Harry Langworthy, had prepared a full-length biography of his great-grandfather. Publishers had turned it down, however, on account of its allegedly excessive length, and the biographer was not willing to meet a prospective publisher’s request to abbreviate by more than half. By this time, Langworthy was terminally ill so there was a poignancy to Fiedler’s ready agreement to work with him on the preparation of his full manuscript for publication in the Kachere Series.<sup>44</sup>

Still, Fiedler, believed that there was more to be done to fully account for Booth’s unique place in Malawi’s history. He embarked on a fresh research project to explore the years that Booth spent in New Zealand and Australia prior to his decision to come to Malawi. This led to the publication of Fiedler’s own distinctive contribution to the Booth literature: *The Making of a Maverick Missionary*.<sup>45</sup> From Booth’s work there emerged an Evangelical movement that tended to find expression in smaller churches that could easily be overlooked in scholarship. Fiedler made it his mission to retrieve their history, thus filling a significant gap in the existing historiography. He was always willing to supervise postgraduate students who wanted to work on Evangelical history. Closely related to Evangelicalism are the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that were to reshape Christianity in Malawi from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Despite the scale of their impact, they had received relatively little scholarly attention – a shortfall that Fiedler was determined to remedy.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, October 1903.

<sup>42</sup> George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000; Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Booth, *Africa for the African* (1897), ed. by Laura Perry, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Langworthy, “Africa for the African”: *The Life of Joseph Booth*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *The Making of a Maverick Missionary: Joseph Booth in Australasia*, Zomba: Kachere, 2008.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Klaus Fiedler, “The Charismatic and Pentecostal Movements in Malawi in Cultural Perspective,” *Religion in Malawi* 9 (1999), 28-38.

played a waiting game until the one-party regime crumbled over the next year or so. Thereafter the paperwork could be resolved, and he embarked on his distinguished academic career in the University.

Meanwhile he needed somewhere to live, or he risked becoming a permanent member of the Ross family. Behind the scenes, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP, Presbyterian) Synod of Blantyre had been working to ensure Fiedler's continued stay in the country. Through its auspices a plan emerged for him to build a house on the campus of Zomba Theological College, on the understanding that he would live in it for as long as he wished and, in the end, would hand it over to the College. The devoted Baptist had become a crypto-Presbyterian! But he was not yet finished with his boundary-crossing. It was going to take some time for the house to be built and he would need somewhere to live in the interim. Within the warm ecumenical fellowship that prevailed among theological institutions in Zomba, St. Peter's Major Seminary offered him a place to stay. He therefore became part of a Catholic and Jesuit-led community, taking part in the entire weekly cycle of worship at the Seminary, except for Sunday mornings when he went to the Baptist Church in town. Eventually, his house was completed, though before long it began to look more like a publisher's office than a domestic residence. There were piles of books and manuscripts everywhere with only a bed in the corner and a small kitchen revealing that someone actually lived there. He lost no time in advocating the introduction of a programme of postgraduate studies, which had been little developed at the University of Malawi in those days. Before long the Department of Theology and Religious Studies was leading the way, with a cohort of part-time MA and PhD students who gathered for a bi-annual colloquium.

During these early years in Zomba, he was acquainting himself with the history of mission and church in Malawi. Impressive research had been completed on the history of the Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic missions, which had dominated the landscape so far as studies of Christianity in Malawi were concerned.<sup>40</sup> Fiedler, however, was not convinced that this was the whole story. Coming "out of left field," his antennae did not take long to locate Joseph Booth, the English/Australian Evangelical missionary who arrived in Blantyre in 1892 to disturb the neat division of territory that until then had been the principle on which missionary work in Nyasaland had been organized. The result, in the view of Alexander Hetherwick of Blantyre

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g. John McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940: The Impact of the Livingstonia Mission in the Northern Province*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; 2nd ed., Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2000; Andrew C. Ross, *Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996, repr. Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2018; Martin Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi: the History of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian 1889-1962*, Wellington: CLF, 2016; R.G. Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa: the Anglican Case 1885-1950," PhD, University of London, 1974; Ian Linden with Jane Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland 1889-1939*, London: Heinemann, 1974; Hubert Reijnaerts, Ann Nielsen and Matthew Schoffeleers, *Montfortians in Malawi: their Spirituality and Pastoral Approach*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1997, repr. Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2019.

who are going to teach religion in schools, where there is Islam, African traditional religion and Christianity" (Phiri, pers. comm., December 29, 2020).<sup>28</sup>

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 Department 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.

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<sup>28</sup> 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).

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 broadcasting (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).<sup>29</sup>

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

<sup>29</sup> 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.

proved to be significant in more ways than one – see below. Fiedler's second doctoral thesis, in its published form *The Story of Faith Missions*, has become the standard text on this subject.<sup>36</sup> Just as Klaus was marking this high point of academic achievement, he faced a crisis at a more personal level as his wife Irene took the decision to separate from him and file for divorce. As he pondered what this would mean for his future, Africa once again captured his imagination.

## Return to Africa

It was on his return to Africa in 1992 that I first met him, when he came to live with our family in our Zomba home for a three-month spell. There was a certain "left field" character to this experience too since he faced rejection almost as soon as he arrived. His appointment seemed to be well set up. Professor Andrew Walls of Edinburgh had recommended that he should offer his services to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi, which had just embarked on offering the country's first Bachelor's degree in theology.<sup>37</sup> The German mission agency Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW)<sup>38</sup> was backing this development and was willing to second Fiedler to the Department as one of its mission partners. The Department was delighted to welcome its new member. However, earlier that year the Catholic Bishops had issued their epoch-making pastoral letter *Living our Faith*, which ultimately led to the downfall of the one-party system in Malawi.<sup>39</sup> At the time of Fiedler's arrival the regime was fighting for its life and not at all well disposed towards potentially troublesome theologians. John Tembo, Chairman of the University Council and power-behind-the-throne in the one-party regime, refused to sign Fiedler's appointment papers. At that time Tembo's authority was beyond challenge, so it appeared that all the hopes for the new appointment had been dashed. Fiedler was banished into deep left field! Many would have given up at this point. Fortunately, being the outsider and the reject was an experience for which Fiedler was equipped. He kept his head down, functioned for some time on an entirely informal basis and

Church," *Evangelical Quarterly* 88/2 (1988), 141-55; repr. in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark & New York: Orbis, 1996, 241-54.

<sup>36</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *Ganz auf Vertrauen, Geschichte und Kirchenverständnis der Glaubensmissionen*, Gießen/Basel: Brunnen, 1992; *The Story of Faith Missions*, Oxford: Regnum, 1994; based on DTh, Heidelberg University, 1991.

<sup>37</sup> See Kenneth R. Ross (ed), *Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi*, Zomba: University of Malawi Department of Theology and Religious Studies and Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1995, 57-75.

<sup>38</sup> Association of German Protestant Missions and Churches.

<sup>39</sup> See Kenneth R. Ross, "Not Catalyst but Ferment: The Distinctive Contribution of the Churches to Political Reform in Malawi 1992-93," in Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, Gweru: Mambo-Kachere, 1995, 31-42; Kenneth R. Ross, "The Renewal of the State by the Church: the Case of the Public Affairs Committee in Malawi", *Religion in Malawi* 5 (1995), 29-37.

to African culture not only provided Klaus with the material for a successful doctoral thesis but shaped his own thinking and practice in the years to come.

Left to himself Klaus would have happily continued for a longer time in southern Tanzania but there was little opportunity for Irene to fulfil her ambitions in terms of professional development. After seven years this prompted their return to Germany, together with their three young children. Irene embarked on her doctoral studies and her training in psychotherapy while Klaus took up a half-time appointment at Ratingen Baptist Church, allowing him to work in the other half of his time on editing Christian journals at a Baptist publishing house in Kassel. Here he developed skills that would serve him well as publishing became an increasingly large part of his life and work. As he became involved in Evangelical missiological circles in Germany, he became the founding editor of a new journal *Evangelikale Missiologie*. Through collaboration with Thomas Schirrmacher (now President of the World Evangelical Alliance) he also became responsible for a book series. This ran on a low-cost model that depended on freely given editorial labour and low print-runs – one that Klaus would later introduce to great effect in Malawi. Meanwhile he also ventured into academic teaching, first at the Evangelical Graduate School of Missions at Bad Liebenzell and Korntal, headed by George Peters, and later at the Evangelical Theological Faculty at Leuven in Belgium.

After six years of combining pastoral and publishing work, Klaus spent a further ten years in Germany with school teaching as his day-job. This period, however, was happily interrupted by the award of a scholarship for post-doctoral research (the German second doctorate or habilitation). This provided Klaus with the opportunity to travel extensively, including trips to east, central and west Africa, and to explore archives in many different locations that held material relevant to his chosen topic of faith missions. Partly through his own experience he became aware that there was a category of missions, exemplified by Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission, that were distinguished by their immediate dependence on God to provide for the needs of their work and by their interdenominational character. Taken all together they represented a large and influential movement, but no one had provided a comprehensive account of the many different missions that shared these common characteristics.

Fiedler's research demonstrated that they were products of the Holiness Revival, sometimes called the Second Evangelical Awakening (1858/9). This meant that they did not compete with the already active "classical" missions but drew on a new reservoir of spirituality, personnel, and resources, fuelled by the revival. They also had a particular orientation to reach the unreached – hence the term "inland" that they often included in their names. In contrast to the classical missions, they were named not in terms of their origin but with reference to the area where they aimed to work. A suggestive essay for the development of his thesis was Andrew Walls' "Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the Church," which was first published in a German translation at Klaus's instigation.<sup>35</sup> His visit to Professor Walls in Edinburgh

<sup>35</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, "Vom Ursprung der Missionsgesellschaften – oder: die glückliche Subversion der Kirchen," *Evangelikale Missiologie* 3 (1987), 35–40 and *Evangelikale Missiologie* 4 (1987), 56–60; and Andrew F. Walls, "Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the

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, Presbyterianism 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

became fluent in Swahili and extended the mission's work to Songea and Mbinga. Meanwhile he transferred his postgraduate registration to the University of Dar-es-Salaam where Professor Isaria Kimambo was appointed as his supervisor.

Klaus had identified the celebrated Leipzig missionary Bruno Gutmann as the focus for his research, relating Gutmann's work to the Moravian Mission whose archives had been drawn to his attention by Professor King at Makerere. He was still pursuing the question of the relation between Christian faith and African culture, on which Gutmann offered an inviting case study. He completed the thesis and graduated in 1977, after his return to Germany. His initial supervisor Louise Pirouet encouraged him from the start to write the thesis as a book – with a view to publication. Klaus fulfilled her hopes – while the thesis was submitted in English, he first published the resultant book in German.<sup>33</sup> The principle of preparing the thesis with a view to publication as a book is one that he later applied to his own postgraduate students.

Through close engagement with the primary sources, both written and oral, Klaus developed a fresh interpretation of Gutmann's mission philosophy. In earlier scholarship he had been portrayed as an arch-conservative who resisted educational development and African leadership. At Old Moshi, however, Klaus met with the two elderly pastors who had been trained by Gutmann and had been among the first generation of African church leaders. In contrast to earlier scholars who had written on Gutmann, he concentrated not on what Gutmann *wrote* in his published work but on what Gutmann actually *did*, drawing on historical sources. He read the minute books that had been written by Gutmann, showing that he had founded four "model schools" qualifying for government grants-in-aid and promoting the learning of English, which was rare among the German missions. Though there was no doubt about his commitment to Chagga language and culture, he was equally concerned that the Chagga be equipped for the coming of modernity. A sensitive issue in this transition was female circumcision, which was banned for church members while Gutmann was absent during the War. This proved to be deeply divisive and when Gutmann returned he advocated a return to the old Leipzig rule of not interfering in such matters. This restored peace and he was hailed as a hero by the Chagga Christians.<sup>34</sup> He hoped that the practice would come to an end, but he knew that the Christian community was not yet ready for such a step. His hopes were later fulfilled when both government and church started to outlaw the practice in the 1970s. Gutmann's sympathetic approach

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<sup>33</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *Christentum und afrikanische Kultur: Konservative deutsche Missionare in Tanzania 1900-1940*, Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen 16, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1983; <sup>2</sup>1984; <sup>3</sup>1993 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft). Revised and substantially expanded edition: *Christentum und afrikanische Kultur: Konservative deutsche Missionare in Tanzania 1900 – 1940*, Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Klaus Fiedler, "Bishop Lucas' Christianization of Traditional Rites, the Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy and the 'Cultural Approach' of Conservative German Missionaries in Tanzania," in Noel Q. King and Klaus Fiedler (eds), *Robin Lamburn – From a Missionary's Notebook: The Yao of Tunduru*, 207-17.

Makerere University in Uganda as the base for his intellectual formation was an unusual move. His academic development also was a matter of coming “from left field.”

Another significant feature of this formative period in Fiedler’s life was the relationship he developed with a young woman named Irene Walther. Like Klaus, she was deeply involved in the Rufer movement, and both were part of a group that collaborated closely in delivering some of its programs. The friendship deepened until, during Klaus’s final year in seminary, they announced their engagement. Irene too had sensed a missionary vocation, so they looked forward to serving together overseas, though first Klaus travelled alone to undertake his year in Uganda while Irene completed her teacher training in Germany. Just before the end of his year at Makerere, he returned abruptly to Germany when his mother died of cancer quite suddenly. Half a year later Klaus and Irene were married. By this time, inspired by Makerere, Klaus had his heart set on doctoral studies and made the commitment that Irene should have the same opportunity in her own chosen field.

His year at Makerere deepened Fiedler’s calling to missionary work in Africa. Again, his orientation to the “left field” came into play. The age of the European missionary in Africa was supposed to be drawing to a close as African nations attained independence and African churches took responsibility for their own governance. Against the general trend, however, Fiedler sensed that his calling was to be a missionary in Africa. This was during the 1960s when students in Europe were revolting against traditional religious and ethical norms, striking out in a decidedly secular direction. Not this particular student! Not only did Fiedler remain deeply convinced in his own Christian faith but he sensed a vocation to become involved with the reception of Christianity in Africa, where the prevailing trends were very different from those of Europe. Embarking on a period of missionary service in southern Tanzania, he moved further into the “left field.” From this point onwards, he was a European who felt more at home in Africa than he did in his own native continent. Not that he was unappreciative of Europe. He continued to cherish his links with family and friends in Germany while also serving for many years as an adjunct Professor of Missiology at the Evangelical Theological Faculty at Leuven in Belgium. But his heart was in Africa and would always be restless until he was back on African soil.

### The Making of a Scholar Missionary

Klaus’ academic formation continued as he returned to Makerere to complete the BA-equivalent that would allow him to embark on postgraduate studies. He registered to take an MA under Louise Pirouet but always with the idea that he would upgrade to PhD. His BA work included a visit to the Anglican missionary Robin Lamburn whose work on the Yao of Tunduru was an inspiration as regards field research.<sup>32</sup> Together with Irene he accepted an appointment to work in southern Tanzania with the Kanisa la Biblia (a Christian Brethren church). He was put in charge of Matemanga mission,

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<sup>32</sup> Noel Q. King and Klaus Fiedler (eds), *Robin Lamburn, From a Missionary’s Notebook: The Yao of Tunduru and other Essays*, Saarbrücken and Fort Lauderdale: Breitenbach Verlag, 1991.

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 investigate 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 intensely 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).

church body that promoted Evangelical commitment among young people in Germany at that time. It set a premium on evangelistic outreach. The focus of such outreach was very much on the German community. Fiedler was unusual in that, even in his teens, he began to think of serving as a foreign missionary. The inspiration, he likes to recall, came from the meeting of faith and geography in his youthful mind.

When he entered the Baptist Theological Seminary at Hamburg in 1962, at the age of twenty, it was with the aim of fulfilling a missionary vocation. While the training was geared to the preparation of pastors, this was always secondary in Fiedler’s mind to the missionary calling. Through his choice of placements for practical work, he was introduced to Christian Brethren congregations where he appreciated the non-clerical approach to church life but was not comfortable with the exclusion of women from leadership roles. During his seminary years he was involved in the planting of a new Brethren congregation in Niendorf, a suburb of Hamburg. He also became aware of the Wiedenest Mission, which worked in Tanzania. This would be significant for the future. Meanwhile, as Klaus was in the final year of his studies, he was encouraged by the Seminary to apply for a World Council of Churches scholarship to study in another country. He was successful and took the opportunity to study at Makerere University in Uganda, an experience which was to prove decisive for the future direction of his life.

He travelled to Kampala overland via Baghdad and Khartoum, ready for adventure. On arrival he was graciously welcomed by Professor Noel Q. King, who even advanced funds to cover living costs while Klaus waited for his scholarship money to arrive. He immediately fell under the spell of Makerere. Intellectually, he had arrived. He immersed himself in study of the people and cultures of Uganda and East Africa. John Mbiti’s course on African Traditional Religion captured his imagination like nothing had done before. However, it was Louise Pirouet’s approach to church history that set the course for his own scholarship. She was using local sources to construct Ugandan church history, a pioneering project at that time.<sup>31</sup> Fiedler’s missionary calling was now combined with a scholarly vocation, and it was mission history that was to be his field. In later life, when it was often assumed that Klaus was a product of the formidable German educational system, he always insisted that it was to Makerere that he owed his intellectual formation and his fascination with research and scholarship.

It has been said that all theology is, in reality, biography. In the case of Klaus Fiedler certainly his theological approach has been influenced by the life that he has led. In his native German context Fiedler came from “left field” in the sense that he did not belong to one of the “mainstream” churches – Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed – which have dominated German Christianity for centuries. Instead, his family were Baptists, an identity that he himself adopted at an early age and maintained all his life. He was conditioned by his upbringing and faith position to take a minority view. He was not finished, however, with positioning himself in the “left field.” For a German to opt for

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<sup>31</sup> Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: The Spread of Christianity in Uganda, 1891-1914*, London: Rex Collings, 1978.



## Out of Left Field: Klaus Fiedler as Theologian for the Nondescript

By Kenneth R. Ross<sup>30</sup>

It is baseball terminology that has added to the English language the phrase, “out of left field.” It refers to the action of the left fielder when they throw the ball to home plate or first base, taking the runner by surprise. It is a phrase that evokes the unexpected and the unusual. Klaus Fiedler is a scholar distinguished by his capacity to be alert to what comes “out of left field.” He has not been content to follow convention or stick to the mainstream. He has preferred to move off the “beaten track” and to explore alternative pathways. This has led him to often focus his work on those who are discounted and despised. Hence, he can be considered a theologian for the “nondescript” – a pejorative term once favored by Malawi’s colonial government to describe missions that did not fit the expected mold. When something is “nondescript” it defies description since it lacks distinctive qualities. Fiedler’s scholarship champions the nondescript, inviting us to take a second look at those who have been discounted, and demonstrating what they have to offer. For those who find themselves excluded, pushed to the margins, not taken seriously, Klaus Fiedler is one theologian who is ready to give them his full attention.

### Early Life and Formation

He was born on January 25, 1942, a wartime baby. His father Otto belonged to a family that had come from Silesia to find employment in the coal mines of the Ruhr in Germany. They were Baptists and it was through the church youth group that Otto met Klaus’s mother Else Goertzen. His sisters Ursula and Melitta were already teenagers when Klaus was born. It was with his brother Othmar, six years his senior, that Klaus formed a particular bond. They shared an interest in travel, collecting stamps from foreign countries and tickets of trams, buses and trains. When Klaus was old enough, they embarked on ambitious cycling trips together. The Baptist values of the family put a premium on education and though circumstances had prevented Otto and Else from progressing far educationally, they were determined that their children should have every opportunity.

Klaus did not particularly shine at school but had his own unconventional approach to the acquisition of knowledge. Geography was the subject that captured his imagination. At the age of 14 he went to the municipal library to borrow every book he could find about Africa. The faith dimension was also assuming an important place in the life of the young teenager. He took to heart the Baptist spirituality in which he had been brought up and took his own decision to follow Christ and be baptised as a fourteen-year-old. His faith commitment led him to join the Rufer movement, a para-

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

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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 experience of women. This opened space in the program for

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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 Devaraksha- nam 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

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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 certain 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

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.

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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 Amélé 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.

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](http://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/resources/documents](http://www.oikoumene.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 anti-semitic (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](http://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](http://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 meeting. 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](http://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