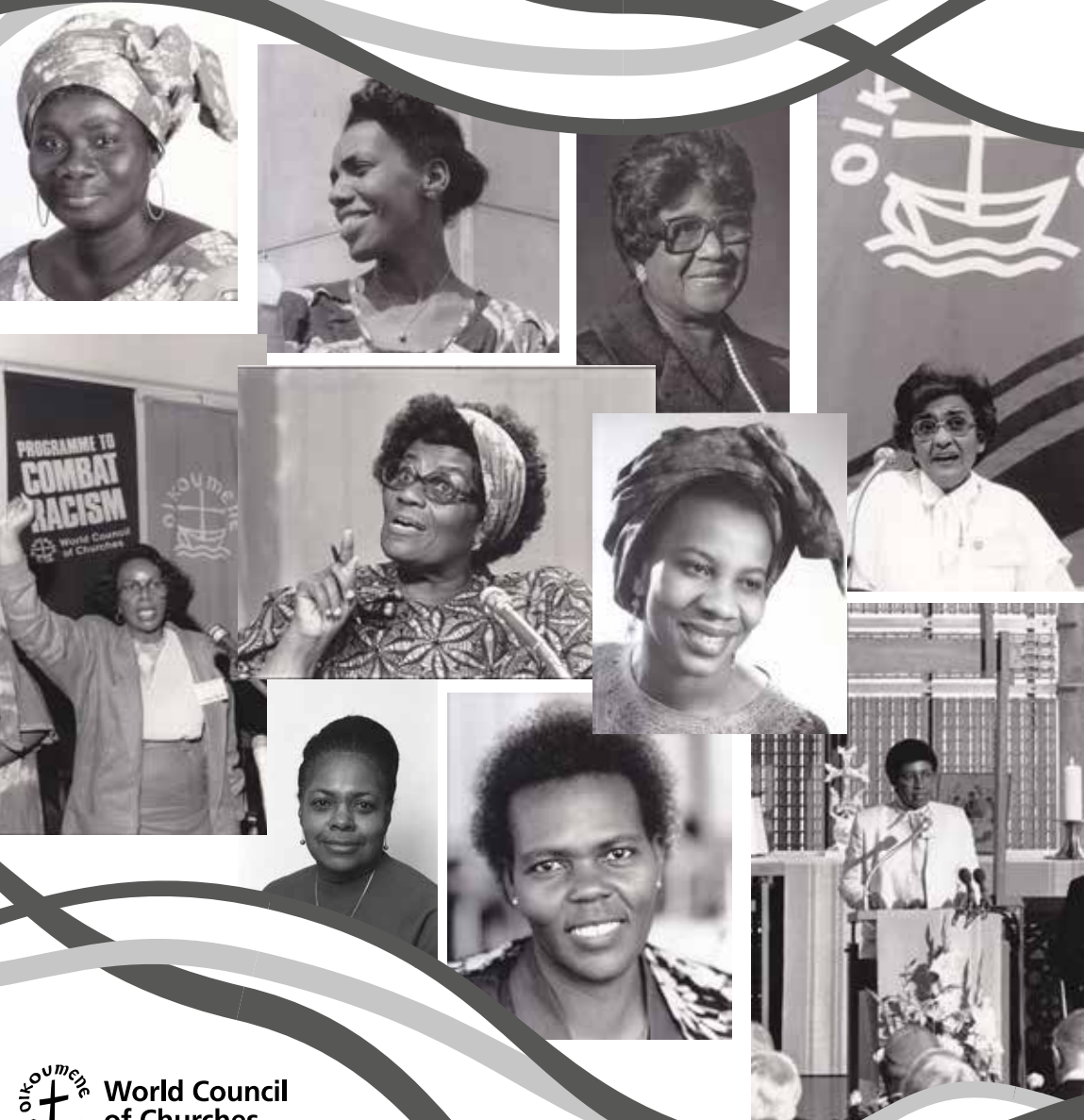
Ahead of Her Time

Pan-African Women of Faith and the Vision of Christian Unity, Mission, and Justice

Angélique Keturah Walker-Smith



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, the Rev. (Elder) Geneva Willis Walker, and my godmother (Mrs) Victoria Weah Tallawford, both born by 1939 in the USA and Liberia (respectively), and to all pan-African women of faith whose stories and contributions to our faith histories, theologies, and ecumenical and evangelical lives have yet to be told.

Endorsements

Oppressive and colonial histories often neglect to recognize the work and contributions of very significant people who have helped change the world. Added to this are cultural, socio-economic and patriarchal leanings that keep in the distant background the incredible and valuable work of women in shaping society, religion, politics, and economy. I am so pleased that the author of this book, Rev. Dr Angélique Walker-Smith, has taken the time and effort to document, recognize, and celebrate the gifts and contributions of women, especially Black women. I certainly applaud and commend this initiative and hope that we will continue to tell the untold stories and reveal the unknown legacies of courageous and remarkable women as we rewrite (his)tory and include (her)story. Well done to the author!
Rev. Dr Jerry Pillay, general secretary, World Council of Churches

Many times, important stories are relegated to the margins of history. What Rev. Dr Angelique Walker Smith, president from North America in the presidium of the World Council of Churches, has done is to elevate the early experiences and impact of pan-African women in the foundational years of modern ecumenism and its subsequent growth and expansion. These stories are essential, and they can be passed down from one generation to the next. Dive deeply and revisit yesterday's struggles and strength and move forward with fresh hopes for today and tomorrow.
Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, general secretary, National Council of Christian Churches in the USA

This book is a call for repentance and a message of righteousness, actions that are exemplified in Rev. Dr Walker-Smith's life journey. Her commitment to ecumenical issues also parallels the journey of the ecumenical movement. During my two terms as moderator of the central committee, I observed her engagement with, her contribution to, and her understanding of the women she acknowledges in the book. I pray that the current publication will become a call and reminder to the member churches and the ecumenical movement to endure in their advocacy for righteousness, continue giving voice to the voiceless, and impart the enriching gift of women. Redemption is through God only.
His Holiness Aram I, Armenian Orthodox Church, Holy See Cilicia.

A Blessed Ode to the Testament of Pan-African Women of Faith

Blessed Assurance[1]

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.
This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

1. "Blessed Assurance," lyrics Fanny Jane Crosby (1820–1915), music Phoebe Palmer Knapp (1839–1908), Public domain.

Contents

Foreword

There is a common saying that the graveyards in Africa are archives of important information, experiences, and innovation that will never be accessed and, therefore, will never contribute to human development. This book seeks to overcome this view by capturing the role and contribution of pan-African women faith leaders in the ecumenical movement in the areas of Christian unity, mission, and justice.

As I read the stories of these pan-African women, it dawned on me that there is a lacuna in the shared historical ecumenical memory of the place, contribution, and intergenerational linkages of women leaders. For example, I wonder how many ecumenists and those in the broader ecumenical fellowship recall the name of Rev. Dr Rena Joyce Weller Karefa-Smart. A woman of African descent, she was among the very few women at the constituting assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948 and played a role in that historic event—writing one of the assembly liturgies, leading the liturgy, and being part of the procession with others in the liturgy.

The author highlights the unique contributions of the first generation of pan-African women leaders in the WCC and the ecumenical fellowship that inspire our desire to know more about their historical moments of being "ahead of their time." For example, it is only in recent years that it has become known that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the only African church at the founding assembly in 1948, along with four of the Historic Black Churches in the United States: the National Baptist Convention, USA; the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church). Also represented were three "minority" churches from East Africa and three from West Africa, as well as two from the Caribbean during this colonial period.

Our ecumenical pilgrimage memory may be getting hazier as the years go by and new generations take up the baton of leadership. This book revives and keeps alive the narratives of founding pan-African leaders and their pivotal roles in the ecumenical movement. pan-African women have not been oblivious to the search, prayer, and work for the unity of the church and humankind. On the contrary, the period from the late 1930s and early 1940s to the 1980s illustrates the active engagement and leadership of these women.

While the women were "ahead of their time," it is important to state that God works ahead of time, and in both the margins and centres of power. Notably, pan-African women leaders in North America were carrying out their ecumenical

calling and mandate during the colonial, reconstruction (immediately following enslavement), and Jim Crow periods: times when courage and wisdom from above were needed. The call for the end of enslavement by another name—structural racism—and the demand for decolonization gained momentum. This was evidenced at the 1945 Pan-African Congresses in Manchester, which followed the first Pan-African Congresses in 1900, where young men and women from the colonies—in Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States—gathered to map out decolonization strategies to end colonial rule, further human rights, and achieve equality of economic opportunity of pan-African peoples. This movement realized only two of its three objectives, with the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

The spirit of resistance, resilience, and resolve in response to the "scramble for Africa" that culminated at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 was evidenced in these Pan-African Congresses in the leadership of the pan-African women in this book and of many others. The courage of these leaders was grounded in their faith and in aspects of the ecumenical movement that accompanied their courageous leadership. Most of the leaders of the Pan-African Congresses, for example, were educated in schools related to the colonial faith institutions, but they remained accountable to their local and national pan-African communities as well as to their faith, which embraced unity, justice, and mission.

The author and my relationship with her

This book is a rescue effort to tell the story of ecumenical pan-African women faith leaders—those who have been called home by their maker and those who are still with us. This book acknowledges and celebrates these matriarchal ancestors and their leadership.

Thus, this book includes interviews as well as resources from the WCC and its archives and the mission archives of several university divinity schools and seminaries. The Rev. Dr Angélique Walker-Smith is a church leader and a woman of African descent from the USA. She belongs to the second generation of pan-African women leaders of faith, of which I am also a member.

This means that the Rev. Dr Angélique Walker-Smith and I have worked and interacted with several of these leaders over the years. Moreover, we served together in WCC governing bodies from the 1990s until 2022, when my time ended as the first WCC moderator (2013–22) who was a woman, African (Kenyan), and layperson. The author's commitment to and passion for keeping the voices and knowledge of our women founders alive and accessible is unquestionable. I witnessed her traverse the continents to capture the remnant leaders and share their narratives.

This second group of pan-African women began to seriously exercise their roles in 1983 at the 6th Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver, Canada. This assembly was a defining moment, as the Rev. Dr Philip Potter, WCC general secretary, lifted an African child to remind the assembly and the world that life was not business as usual. He stated if the WCC and churches—including women and

men of goodwill—did not give priority to matters of justice, peace, and integrity of creation, then future generations would have no inheritance.

Issues addressed

The agenda and critical issues of the day are determined by the global context as well as ecclesial life, and the WCC and member churches respond and give leadership to them. However, member churches and participants also raise thematic issues that affect them directly. At times, these actions do not go over well with some member churches. A look at the issues addressed over the decades indicates the courage and commitment of women during the seasons of colonialism, post-enslavement, and Jim Crow.

At times, issues challenged the leadership and structures of the church. Just before the 5th WCC Assembly in 1975, Dr Brigalia Bam, Director of the Department of Co-operation of Men and Women in Church and Society, led an ecumenical delegation to a United Nations conference in Denmark on sexism. This was an issue of concern in the church and later evolved into one of gender justice and the just community of women and men. On matters of education and access for poor people, Dr Marie Assaad, from the Coptic Orthodox Church (Egypt), who served as deputy general secretary of the WCC from 1980 to 1986, supervised a programme related to Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed." In a controversial undertaking at the time, she advocated for the protection of women and girls by decrying the cutting of their bodies.

Matters of advocacy have always raised eyebrows. Justice Annie Jiagge and the Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk steered the anti-racism programme, breaking new ground. However, despite gains made, racism remains a thorn in the flesh of the church, the WCC, and society at large. The right to health by all, still a matter of concern today, was put squarely on the table of churches and governments by Dame Ruth Nita Barrow and Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot. Dr Mary Olivia Ross, of enslaved African ancestry, became the leader of the largest African-American women's Historic Black Church auxiliary, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. Women's Auxiliary. She strategically balanced loving solidarity with her ecumenical and Historic Black Church relationships and her priorities of unity, justice, and mission in and outside of the churches.

These women did not overlook the theological underpinnings of their work. Dr Mercy Oduyoye, who served in key ecumenical organizations—the Christian Student Movement, the World Student Christian Federation, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the WCC—has written and contributed to the theological discourse from a feminist and African woman's perspective. Indeed, all the women discussed in this book had led through an operational theological framework that led to reforms and moments of transformation.

On the whole, pan-African women of faith leaders have raised matters pertaining to economic justice and overcoming poverty, as it has affected women and children more than other groups in society. Participation of women in the

ecumenical movement and specifically in the WCC was at the heart of these pan-African women leaders.

Although progress is registered in the ordination of women, participation in leadership is still uncertain. The themes these women have addressed, such as racism and poverty, remain relevant today and continue to serve as a beacon. They urge the WCC and churches to find new approaches and not to relent but to continue the struggle for unity, justice, and peace.

My experience in the ecumenical movement

I began my ecumenical pilgrimage at the 5th Assembly of the WCC, held in Nairobi, Kenya—my country. Since then, I have participated in WCC commissions and assemblies, including the 6th Assembly held in Vancouver. From 1998 to 2006, I served as the WCC Africa president, and from 2007 to 2013, my role was as a member of the central and executive committees. At the 10th Assembly of the WCC, held in Busan, South Korea, I was elected moderator of the WCC central committee, a position I held until September 2022, when the 11th WCC Assembly was held in Karlsruhe, Germany, and I concluded my mandate.

I served in this leadership role as the first woman and as the first African. My participation spans a period of 40 years, and I have worked with Dr Marie Assaad, Dr Brigalia Bam, and Dame Ruth Nita Barrow as well as others of the pan-African leaders named here.

Dr Agnes Abuom
Moderator of the WCC Central Committee 2013–22

(†31/05/2023)
Dr Canon Agnes Abuom passed away on 31 May 2023 at the age of 73. This book is in memory of her and her legacy.


Conseil œcuménique
des Eglises

Introduction

> At the funeral of Her Excellency Dame Ruth Nita Barrow in Barbados on 29 December 1995, the former WCC general secretary, Rev. Dr Philip Potter, said the following: "She was as strong as an ox and mild as a dove. Nita helped women equip themselves to have their own identity, their integrity, in equality with men. And she did this with her own shining example.[1]

I am a witness to Her Excellency's shining example, whose light influenced my own journey of faith. This book is, in part, a result of my arresting encounter with her leadership.

On 8 February 1991, I arrived at the 7th Assembly of the WCC in Canberra, Australia, not knowing that my life was about to change. Honestly, I did not know what to expect from my first WCC assembly, although I had been at the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) gathering in South Korea the previous year. I knew enough to recognize that the assembly would be different. But I did not have a clue how different!

I arrived alone in Canberra, Australia, after having met with my national church leadership at our annual board assembly session in January 1991, the month before the assembly was to take place. The church leadership determined that 12 delegates would represent my national church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. I was so honoured and excited to be one of the 12 chosen to be a delegate! Given my cradle birth into this national Historic Black Baptist church family and growing up knowing the amazing legacy of my Convention and the awe in which it was held by my family and church family, I had not even imagined such a moment.

At the time of the assembly, I was serving in a unique role as an executive of the Council of Churches in Trenton, New Jersey, where I was one of the youngest and very few ecumenical women of African descent serving as an executive leader in conciliar ecumenism at that time in the United States. Sadly, however, at this same board meeting, I learned that my national church, like many other WCC-related national churches in the world, debated whether to go to Canberra for the 7th WCC Assembly because of the Gulf War. Many thought it was unsafe and ill-advised to travel at that time. I was invited to be a part of these deliberations with

1. Eric Nurse, "Hundreds Attend Burial of Dame Ruth Nita Barrow," *AP News*, 29 December 1995.

my church leadership at this mid-winter board meeting. With my young adult heart, I tried to make the case for the delegation to travel. Alas, they determined this was not an option for the 12 delegates.

After much discussion, however, my general secretary, the Rev. Dr W. Franklyn Richardson, and president, the Rev. Dr T. J. Jemison, sent me on my way alone in the general secretary's place with their prayers and support as their representative for the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. This was an intimidating proposal. I recognized then, and still recognize now, that representing the Convention of our beloved ancestors—whose shoulders I stood on and still stand on in my roles with the WCC and wider ecumenical family—was a unique missional calling.

Our national church Convention has a great ecumenical legacy of forebearers on the WCC central committee: the Rev. Dr W. Franklyn Richardson, Convention general secretary (1983–91, elected in Vancouver); Dr Mary Olivia Brookins Ross, leader of the Convention's Women's Auxiliary (delegate to the assemblies in Evanston in 1954, Uppsala in 1968, and Vancouver in 1983); Rev. Dr J. H. Jackson, former president of the Convention; and Rev. Dr Benjamin E. Mays, former president of Morehouse College and mentor to the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King (delegates at the 1948 assembly in Amsterdam and present during the formative years of the WCC in the 1930s and early 1940s). Rev. Dr King was born into the Convention like his father, Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Sr, also known as "Daddy King." In 1961, Rev. Dr King also co-founded another Historic Black Church in the USA, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Less than a month after these difficult discussions, after my departure from Trenton, New Jersey, and a two-day journey across the international dateline, I arrived in Sydney, Australia, and then travelled further to Canberra. It was my first time visiting the Pacific region. I was greeted with the assembly theme of "Come, Holy Spirit—renew the whole creation." There were close to 1,000 voting delegates and hundreds more participants from the WCC member churches and partner organizations, from over 100 countries. I arrived late. They had already started their business sessions, reviewing the work of the WCC since its 6th Assembly, which had met in Vancouver, Canada, in 1983, and were starting to set the general guidelines for the council's future work during the assembly, the days prior, and at the pre-assemblies.[2]

I arrived exhausted but was so very excited to have made it safely to the plenary hall for the business deliberations. I took my one lonely seat on behalf of the delegation of the 12 that would not be coming. Fatigued and excited at the same time, I suddenly noticed the tenor and tone of the meeting I had walked into. I noted that the noisy session of various conversations did not have regard for the moderator, processes, and organization of the deliberations. Frustrated by this,

2. Michael Kinnamon, *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), https://archive.org/details/wcca23.

along with others, I prayed this would be addressed. I was relieved when the delegates were dismissed for a break.

After returning to the room, I saw where God had answered my prayer and, I'm sure, the prayers of others. The answer came in the person of a regal woman of African descent whom I did not know or have knowledge of. She gracefully moved across the front of the room and stepped onto the stage. I noted the hush in the room that arrested the attention of all present! She approached the podium with aplomb in her distinguished attire and gait, and then firmly called the meeting to order. Not only were the deliberations furthered and order restored, but the stature of her presence had also captured my ecumenical and evangelical heart and imagination of what a young pan-African woman of faith should know and might become in exhibiting ecumenical excellence and exemplary leadership in an ecumenical world.

Although I had previews and glimpses of this vision before this epiphany, this moment put me on a renewed journey of affirmed call and discovery; on the ecumenical and evangelical journey and desire to know more women like WCC president, Dame Ruth Nita Barrow from Barbados.

This book is an outcome of this journey of ecumenical and evangelical call and discovery. It is the result of my having been inspired not only to learn more about Dame Ruth Nita Barrow and other pan-African women of faith, but to find ways to follow their distinguished legacies and to perpetuate their legacies of ecumenical excellence.

In this regard, I am especially grateful to the WCC's Ecumenical Theological Education programme and Bread for the World in Washington, DC, for their accompaniment of the Pan African Women of Faith (PAW)/Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN) since the WCC assembly in Busan in 2013. I am grateful for the ecumenical legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the Sisters Network, the African and African Diaspora Voices of Women with the Decade in Solidarity with Women initiative, the WCC programme of Just Community of Women and Men, the development and advance of womanist theology, and other ecumenical initiatives and projects that this work seeks to honour and follow.

Overview

This book is the result of the journey I described above. I have had a privileged and holy journey in the global ecumenical movement with great pan-African women of faith like Dame Ruth Nita Barrow, just as moderator Dr Abuom identified in her journey. As part of the second generation of pan-African women of faith, from 1983 forward, with her and several of the women in this book, I am a witness to how God's grace and power strengthened their courage and boldness to be trailblazers, who not only spoke and wrote but also, very importantly, acted.

But the journeys of these women should not be siloed stories of the privileged like me, Dr Abuom, and certain others. Rather, the stories and contributions

of these women to church history and ecumenical life should be shared widely and codified. They should be required subjects in normative teachings of church history, and not only women's history. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of this work is to help rewrite and decolonize the narratives and approaches of church and ecumenical history for the benefit of us all.

In sum, this book is one of the tools of my bearing witness to a critically important testament of pan-African women of faith in the early days of the modern ecumenical movement and the churches. Sadly, I cannot name them all in this publication. Some I could not include due to the limited scope of this book. At the same time, it is important to understand that the contributions of pan-African women of faith are a part not only of the modern ecumenical movement but of the ancient and historical narratives of the churches as well: "Since the earliest Biblical accounts in Genesis, women of African descent have played a critical role in shaping the Judeo-Christian faith. Now is the time for a deeper understanding of pan-African women's leadership—from women like Hagar and Zipporah in the Bible to the modern ecumenical movement."[3]

This also includes women such as these who were saints of Africa. One of these saints was St Catherine from Egypt. She excelled in beauty, knowledge, wealth, and nobility. She upheld the name of Christ even while undergoing torture from her assailants, who decried her and Jesus the Christ. But she endured her suffering with prayers and preaching and brought many to Christ. On 24 November 310 CE, she was beheaded but was "attained to paradise and arms of her beloved Lord and Master Jesus Christ."[4] In the hymn "Troparion (Tone 4)," associated with her in the Saints of Africa series for 24 November, she is one of many saints that could be named:

> By your virtues as by rays of the sun you enlightened the unbelieving philosophers,
> and like the brightest moon you drove away the darkness of disbelief from those walking in the night;
> you convinced the queen, and also chastised the tyrant,
> God-summoned bride blessed Catherine.
> You hastened with desire to the heavenly bridal chamber of the fairest Bridegroom Christ,
> and you were crowned by Him with a royal crown;
> standing before Him with the angels, pray for us who keep your most

3. "Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN)," World Council of Churches, accessed 11 October 2023, https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/pan-african-womens-ecumenical-empowerment-network.

4. Fr. Jerome Sanders and Carla Thomas, *Saints of Africa, African Saints Series (Indianapolis: Christ the Savior Brotherhood Publishing, 2016), 9–12.*

sacred memory.[5]

This book is also linked to the WCC's Ecumenical Theological Education programme and Bread for the World's ecumenical partnership project, which represents many churches and networks. The Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network/Pan African Women of Faith (PAWEEN/PAW) seeks to rewrite the narrative by engaging in critical theological reflection and other forms of writing and advocacy, especially on the issues of hunger and poverty, speaking, and use of technology and social media tools. This network "gathers the stories of pan-African women, too often neglected in ecumenical and church history, and uses them for leadership capacity development and theological education. Building on these women's experiences, we have found new and renewed models of Christian leadership and discipleship for the changing landscape of Christianity" and the world.[6]

The network makes available research, publications, and other resources to engage and challenge the ecumenical movement. In cooperation with other WCC programmes, such as the Just Community of Women and Men, and ecumenical partners, such as the All Africa Conference of Churches and the World YWCA, the network works through seminars and conferences, mentoring, and exchanges via digital networking platforms. See chapter 6 for more.

Scope of the book

The scope of this book includes the formative years of the WCC and related ecumenical streams like the missionary movement, the Life and Work movement, the Faith and Order movement, the YWCA, YMCA, and World Student Christian Federation, and the contextual relatedness to Pan-African movements. But the focus of this book is the chronological period from the early 1900s to 1983. Additionally, one chapter provides an overview of related ecumenical events and pan-African networks after 1983.

This book primarily looks at examples of legendary ecumenical leadership of African women and women of African descent (pan-African women) during the periods of the first six WCC assemblies. In this regard, it explores pan-African trends that interfaced with the ecumenical movement through the stories and contributions of a sampling of these women, who are often not included in our ecumenical and church histories or herstories.

The pan-African women of faith in this book lived in periods of swift transitions in their home countries and globally. The public voices of pan-African women were often, even normally, intentionally muted, their presence intentionally

5. Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, St. Katherine of Alexandria, http://ww1.antiochian.org/node/16856.

6. "Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN)," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/pan-african-womens-ecumenical-empowerment-network.

minimized in the dominant Westernized colonial global system, culture, and the socio-political legal structures that did not fully embrace their identities as African in and outside of Africa.

Despite this, these women were "ahead of their time," in great part because of their faith and ability to live in multicultural and multilingual spaces and places while maintaining their integrity as women of Africa and women of African descent. By God's grace and their eyes of faith, they were still able to see what was possible despite the structural, legal, and hierarchical challenges of racism, sexism, and classism. They rose to the occasion of Christian leadership that was reformative and transformative in ways that have benefitted all of us. It has been my great joy and profound honour to walk closely with them in this work for many years and, very importantly, to try to learn how to give testimony to their lives.

Another goal of the book is to showcase these women's pan-African ecumenical priorities as leaders, not only in their home countries but throughout Africa, the African diaspora, and globally in seasons when this was not normative and when they were certainly much less visible than their white ecumenical counterparts. Their stories are meant to be illustrative of the extraordinary leadership of pan-African women of faith globally who have not been given the attention and visibility they should have in church history and the ecumenical narrative.

Rev. Dr Angélique Keturah Walker-Smith
World Council of Churches President from North America, 2022–30
Senior Associate/Strategist for Pan-African and Orthodox Faith Engagement at Bread for the World (USA)
Ecumenical Representative for National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Chapter One


DELEGATES TO THE 1ST PAN-
AFRICAN CONGRESS, HELD AT
NEW YORK CITY. AUG 1927.

Overview of Ecumenical and Pan-African Trends before 1948

Official records tell us that the WCC planned to begin its work in the 1930s but could not because of World War II. Indeed, the WCC was constituted after previous ecumenical streams had been established. The official report of the 1948 assembly states there were three streams:

> 1) the missionary movement, which has made the Church a world-wide community; 2) the "Life and Work," movement, which has brought the churches together in their attempts to make Christianity more effective in its relation to society; and 3) the 'Faith and Order' movement, which has explored the differences in basic Christian conviction that must be reconciled if the unity of the Church as one visible Body of Christ is to be attained. If a single date were to be selected as the beginning of the organizational ancestry of the World Council of Churches, it would doubtless be 1910.[1]

This 1910 missionary conference in Edinburgh led to the formation of a network of interdenominational councils in more than a score of countries over the next decade. These councils were brought together in the International Missionary Council, where younger churches and the missionary bodies of the older churches had consultation and identified cooperation in common tasks.

The women

All the women profiled in this book were born by 1939, during this period of ecumenical formation. This was also the colonial period of Africa after the "Scramble for Africa" in Berlin, Germany.[2] In 1884–85, structured mapping divided peoples and families into so-called nation-states set up to benefit the imperialistic agendas of Europe, the United States, and Canada. This was a colonial period designed to codify institutions, policies, and practices that constrained and

1. *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Held at Amsterdam, August 22nd to September 4th, 1948,* Amsterdam Assembly Series, vol. 5, ed. W. A. Visser't Hooft (London: SCM Press, Ltd, 1949), WCC Digital Archive: https://archive.org/details/wcca5/page/n5/mode/2up.

2. "The Scramble for Africa," St John's College, University of Cambridge, https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble_for_africa.

managed African peoples without regard for their voices, presence, and leadership. Related governments, capitalistic profit-making enterprises, and churches were complicitous with these practices, which included the exploitation of the human labour of African peoples.

Although the formal colonial period of the US nation-state under the rule and subjugation of European kingdoms had formally ended by 1800,[3] Indigenous, Latino/a, and African peoples (many of whom were also Indigenous peoples) throughout the Americas and elsewhere did not experience the ending of colonialism. Rather, they experienced deepened subjugation from the period of the oppressive rule of enslavement, racist and sexist structures, and dominant powers of the old and new colonizers.

This means the women of Africa and of African descent in this book were born at a time when most churches in these contexts were not independent of colonial churches that also represented the values and constructs of their colonial nation-states and their political and economic interests. This also means that there are pan-African women of faith in this book who were granddaughters or great-granddaughters of enslaved parentage, and who may have known their enslaved ancestors. This also means that the present memory of Indigenous formulations of spirituality and culture may have been known by them, but not acknowledged or affirmed in the colonized Christian or non-Christian schools and churches they may have been a part of. Indeed, such formulations may have been rejected and outright condemned.

Liberia and Ethiopia were exceptions. Their location, economic viability, and unity helped Ethiopia and Liberia avoid colonization. Still, scholars like Alistair Boddy-Evans acknowledge the debate about this. He states, "The truth, however, is that brief periods of varying levels of foreign control during their early histories have left the question of whether Liberia and Ethiopia truly remained fully independent a subject of debate."[4] Further, it is very important to note that African peoples also found ways to resist colonization and found ways for ancient formulations of African peoples to still exist as they had for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the Westernized colonizers.

Church movements by Black churches in the Americas found and created renaissance spaces despite rejection and oppression from the white dominant culture in and outside churches. Such led to a reformation of spaces for a renewed gospel of liberation formed outside of the colonial church frameworks that most often denied the humanity and divinity of Black people. Indigenous communities, inside and outside of African communities, still found ways to maintain streams of ancient spiritualities and legacies in churches and other faith communities of African peoples in the places where they arrived during the violent

3. Joshua Mark, "European Colonization of the Americas," *World History Encyclopedia,* 19 October 2020, https://www.worldhistory.org/European_Colonization_of_the_Americas/.

4. "Scramble for Africa."

and torturous enslavement period and afterwards. Legendary African-American scholar, Dr Albert Raboteau, refers to this as "slave religion."[5] At the same time, African churches such as the Orthodox churches in Africa and elsewhere were also exceptions having been founded in the ancient days of the churches. But all these expressions, had to interface with the dominant imperial powers that sought to hinder their free and humane expression and dignity.

Still, African peoples, regardless of location, have continued to write and live their own histories and herstories of resolve, resistance, and resilience despite these historical and violent challenges. An important example of this was the Pan-African Congresses of pan-African peoples that started meeting and planning before and during 1900 soon after the "Scramble for Africa" conference. Liberia and Ethiopia became beacons of hope that showed alternative narratives. "The Haitian Revolution has often been described as the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the Western Hemisphere. Enslaved African peoples initiated the rebellion in 1791 and by 1803 they had succeeded in ending not just slavery but French control over the colony."[6] Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, and many other names are associated with resolve and resistance to the subjugation of African peoples. In 1920, for example, Marcus Garvey pulled together a pan-African gathering of over 20,000 Africans and people of African descent in Madison Square Garden in New York City with financial and in-kind support from the collective enterprise of the pan-African peoples gathered. Additionally, at the same time—before the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948—the Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World was adopted and ratified.[7] Collectively, efforts like these eventually led to the independence of African and Caribbean countries, the civil rights movement, and the establishment of independent churches.

Pan-Africanism and the Pan-African Congresses

The Pan-African Congresses had the first formal meeting with the Pan-African Conference in 1900 and continued throughout the 20th century. But the beginnings of this were already in the late 1800s after the "Scramble for Africa" in 1884–85. As Saheed Adejumobi writes, "Pan-Africanist philosophy held that slavery and colonialism depended on and encouraged negative, unfounded categorizations of the race, culture, and values of African people. These destructive beliefs, in turn, gave birth to intensified forms of racism, the likes of which Pan-

5. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

6. Claudia Sutherland, "Haitian Revolution (1791–1804)," *BlackPast,* 16 July 2007, https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/haitian-revolution-1791-1804/.

7. "'Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World': The Principles of the Universal Negro Improvement Association," 13 August 1920, reprinted in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Papers, vol. 2,* ed. Robert Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 572–80, at History Matters, https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5122/.

Africanism sought to eliminate."[8]

The congresses were made up of various pan-African political leaders and intellectuals and managed to meet six times from 1900 to 1945. During this period they discussed colonial control and developed strategies for pan-African liberation. As mentioned earlier, pan-African women were a part of this and other movements they initiated. This included church-based and secular places where their leadership was engaged.

It is important here to point out that Pan-Africanism is a socio-political and cultural concept. Saheed Adejumobi states the following:

> As a broader political concept, Pan-Africanism's roots lie in the collective experiences of African descendants in the New World. Africa assumed greater significance for some blacks in the New World for two primary reasons. First, the increasing futility of their campaign for racial equality in the United States led some African-Americans to demand voluntary repatriation to Africa. Next, for the first time the term *Africans*, which had often been used by racists as a derogatory description, became a source of pride for early black nationalists. Hence, through the conscious elevation of their African identity, black activists in the USA and the rest of the world began to reclaim the rights previously denied them by Western societies.[9]

This continues today, especially after the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Pan-African women in the public space

While 1948–83 was a period of formation for the WCC, the Pan-African Congresses and pan-African women's movement, which predated the formation of the Organization of African Unity—now the African Union—were happening at the same time. These movements also contributed to the eventual evolution of Black theology, liberation theology, and womanist theology in the 1970s and 1980s.

It was a period of rapid change that furthered a codified and fortified colonial period in Africa and a post-enslavement period of Jim Crow racism in the United States. This was a period when sharecropping became another economic system of exploited labour on the same lands where people of African descent were exploited by enslaved labour.

Indeed, pan-African women, whether in Africa or in the African diaspora, had the faith, courage, and audacity to work toward their movement goals inside and

8. Saheed Adejumobi, "The Pan-African Congresses, 1900–1945," *BlackPast,* 30 July 2008, https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/pan-african-congresses-1900-1945/.

9. Saheed Adejumobi, "The Pan-African Congresses, 1900–1945."

out of the churches. They did this while still advocating for their gender issues, not only with those from outside of their communities but also with those within it. This included leadership in the first five Pan-African Congresses between 1900 and 1945, which relied heavily on women's administrative and financial support but did not fully acknowledge their vision and demands.

Robin D. G. Kelley has stated, quoting W. E. B. Du Bois, that people of African descent have historically linked national concerns to global ones, viewing their condition as "but a local phase of a world problem."[10] But the challenge has been the telling of women's stories at any of these levels or periods of time. In their ground-breaking work *To Turn the World Over*, Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany Gil state, "Although these works center on the global visitations of people of African descent in the United States and abroad, they often deemphasize the crucial role black women have played in the long history of internationalism. The scholarship on the 'Black International' has been predominantly male-centric . . . . With few exceptions, black women have been marginalized in historical narratives of black internationalism."[11]

Blain and Gil further their discussion by referring to pan-African women who created their own pan-African organizations at the grassroots, national, and global levels. They linked their struggles with the struggles for liberating African peoples in Africa and within the African diaspora. The authors identify women like Amy Ashwood Garvey from Jamaica and Ethel M. Collins, Una Marson, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Amy Bailey, Josephine Moody, Claudia Jones, Elaine Cooper, Maymie de Mena, Amy Jacques Garvey, Victoria Johnson Schaack, and other pan-African women who had a pan-African vision and fought the entrenched colonialism, imperialism, racism, and gender disparities of this period from outside and inside their faith communities.

Their leadership took place in countries in Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, Canada, and Europe. They also created their own pan-African organizations to connect their struggles for liberating African peoples and ending gender inequality.[12]

By 1960, the pan-African dream of liberation was gaining a foothold with the movement for independent African and Caribbean nations as well as in freedom movements of African peoples in North America.

The Pan-African Women's Organization

Up to 1961, the movement for African women and men to resist colonialism and

10. Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *The Journal of American History* 86:3 (December 1999): 1045–77, at 1.

11. Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 3.

12. Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 135–47.

the accompanying violence that affected both groups led to organizations like the All-African Women's Conference in Conakry, Republic of Guinea. By July 1962, the Conference of African Women was held in Tanzania (known as Tanganyika at the time). African and African Diaspora women gathered from throughout Africa, representing 14 countries and a host of resistance organizations. They established themselves as "the Union of African Women." They included women of faith who connected their liberation with their organizational objectives. It was the first collective group of its kind.

Their organizing platform included liberation, decolonization, girls' education, regulation of early marriage, women's consent, elimination of apartheid and segregation, political participation and leadership, and healthcare. They also set up an African Women's Day throughout Africa and the African Diaspora that is still commemorated annually on 31 July each year. They brought their agenda to the formation of the Organization of the African Union, now the African Union, in 1963.

By 1974, the Union of African Women had convened a congress in Dakar, Senegal and renamed their group the Pan-African Women Organization (PAWO). Today, PAWO continues to maintain the mission of women's priorities from the early days of its formation and youth leadership. PAWO maintains observer status with the African Union.

The Young Women's Christian Association and the World Student Christian Federation

During this same period and transitional context, two other significant global ecumenical bodies contributed to the leadership of some pan-African women in the early 1900s: the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF).

The WSCF was founded in in Sweden 1895 by John R. Mott and Karl Fries. This group was a stream that contributed to the formation of the WCC, providing the development of ecumenical leaders who would emerge later during the ecumenical movement. The WSCF tells us the WCC owes much of its founding leadership to former members of the WSCF.[13] These student leaders came mainly from North America and Europe.

A close relationship existed between the WSCF, the YWCA, and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), largely because Mott was also a leader of the YMCA. Much of the subsequent work of establishing and linking the WSCF was done with the assistance of YMCAs and YWCAs.[14]

Some of the pan-African women identified in this publication were part

13. World Student Christian Federation, "The Federation: About Us," https://www.wscf.ch/who-we-are/the-federation/about-us#:~:text=The%20WSCF%20is%20the%20oldest,Council%20of%20Churches%20(WCC).

14. World Student Christian Federation, "The Federation: About Us."

of these student movements that supported their ecumenical formation and leadership. In 1855, the history of the YWCA began with the founding of a London Christian Home for nurses who were serving in the Crimean War. It also provided hospitable support for single women from rural areas seeking to work in London. Institutionally, the missional and devotional goals were already brought together. These two groups came together in 1877 as the Young Women's Christian Association and adopted a constitution.[15] In 1884 they restructured. In 1894, they became the World YWCA, which would have an important role in leadership development and other forms of Christian hospitality with, for and by pan-African women of faith in the ecumenical movement.

Pan-African women of faith: "Ahead of their time"

The overwhelming evidence of pan-African women of faith being disproportionately affected by the colonial challenges of legally codified and institutional racism, sexism, classism, and other structural inequities in the early to mid-1900s, and more specifically 1948–83, raises the following question: How is it that these women, despite their invisibility and marginalization and their narratives in church and ecumenical and societal history, emerge to lead in their churches and ecumenical organizations and movements "ahead" of what is arguably their expected time? How was this possible during some of the most entrenched colonial periods they were born and raised in? Nina Banks of the Economic Policy Institute points out, for example, the following in the context of the USA:

> Until the 1970s, employers' exclusion of black women from better-paying, higher-status jobs with mobility meant that they had little choice but to perform private domestic service work for white families. . . . Black women even today continue to be overrepresented in-service jobs. Nearly a third (28 percent) of black women are employed in service jobs compared with just one-fifth of white women.[16]

A study on educational gender inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa published by the *Population and Development Review* tells us that in "most of the 21 African countries they studied in 2021, gender gaps increased during most of the colonial

15. "Young Women's Christian Association," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* https://www.britannica.com/topic/Young-Womens-Christian-Association.

16. Nina Banks, "Black Women's Labor Market History Reveals Deep-Seated Race and Gender Discrimination," *Working Economics Blog, Economic Policy Institute,* 19 February 2019, https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/.

era (ca. 1880–1960) and declined, albeit at different rates, after independence."[17] In another study, Montaz Marche examines the imperialist migratory patterns of African women to Europe that also shared these gender gaps. He points out that, too often, the experiences of Black women have been left out of the history of 18th- and 19th-century Britain.[18] In sum, it was a time when leaders were predominantly men who were white and Eurocentric and when the dominant culture showed little equitable legal and moral regard for African peoples.

While these are critical observations, it is important to note that pan-African women were still important leaders in their faith communities during the periods of enslavement, the reconstruction period following enslavement, and the regressive and oppressive period of Jim Crow after reconstruction and other structured colonial contexts in most places in the world. Kate Drumgoold, a pan-African woman who was enslaved in the USA in the 1800s, wrote about why this was possible:

> He heard the prayers of the faithful ones, and came to deliver them out of Egypt. For God loves those that are oppressed, and will save them when they cry unto him, and when they put their trust in Him. Some of the dear ones, have gone to the better land, but this is one of the answers to their prayers. We, as the Negro Race, are a free people, and God be praised for it. We as the Negro Race, need to feel proud of the race, and I for one do with all my heart and soul and mind, knowing as I do, for I have labored for the good of the race, that their children might be the bright shining lights.[19]

Years after Drumgoold's recollection, Sharon Harley reminds us that the spiritual and moral forces like those described above persevered in the early 1920s, referring to the US context: "Black women's political engagement from the antebellum period to the opening decades of the twentieth century helped to define their post-1920 political activism."[20]

This book considers the leadership of nine pan-African women of faith associated with the global ecumenical movement. It is based on research through

17. Joerg Baten, Michiel de Haas, Elisabeth Kempter, and Felix Meier zu Selhausen, "Educational Gender Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Long-Term Perspective," *Population and Development Review* 47:3 (2021), 813–49, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/paDr12430.

18. Montaz Marche, "Uncovering Black Women in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century Britain," University College of London, History, 23 October 2019, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/news/2019/oct/uncovering-black-women-eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century-britain.

19. Katie Drumgoold, "A Slave Girl's Story," in *Women's Slave Narratives,* ed. Annie L. Burton and others (Mineola: Dover Publications 2006), 107.

20. Sharon Harley, "African-American Women and the Nineteenth Amendment," National Park Service, April 2019, https://www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-women-and-the-nineteenth-amendment.htm.

the WCC archives, mission libraries, interviews, and my own encounters with the women, as well as the actual written and oral works of these women. These women were chosen because of the importance of their presence and their leadership roles in this context, primarily between the late 1930s and 1983.

These pan-African women demonstrated a commitment to the ecumenical movement and a pan-African heritage that transcended and engaged them and their homelands. Each was rooted in her devoted faith, family, culture, and communities, which grounded them in their vision and commitment to Christian unity, mission, and justice. This is a vision fundamental to churches that, both then and today, is ecumenical, evangelical, and missional—inside and outside churches.

Chapter Two








1948–61: WCC's Early Assemblies and the Emergence of the First Generation of Pan-African Women Faith Leaders

1st Assembly of the WCC, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1948

Much of the ecumenical history leading up to and during the 1st Assembly of the WCC has been previously discussed. Between 23 August and 4 September 1948, in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, 147 national churches from different confessions and many countries came together to commit themselves to the ecumenical movement. Few African churches attended from Africa and the African diaspora. Four Historic Black Churches from the United States were present as was the (ancient) Church of Ethiopia and churches in East and West Africa which were invited based on the provision of the Utrecht Constitution concerning minority churches. This minority distinction was also applied in the West Indies. The (ancient) Coptic Church had been invited and accepted but was not present in 1948. In 1948, many churches in Africa and the West Indies were mission churches, sometimes referred to as younger churches, with primary leadership, relationships and institutional identities in Europe and the USA.[1]

It is important to especially recognize the ancient presence of African Christianity not only at the assembly but in Christendom. Pan-African women have been an important presence during the biblical and ancient periods of Christianity, as stated earlier. The ancient African churches include the Coptic Orthodox Church (Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. "The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church reports that their history dates back to 'the acceptance of Christianity by the Kingdom of Aksum in 330'[2] The church has around 43.8 million adherents in Ethiopia. The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church are founding members of the WCC. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is in communion with the other Oriental Orthodox churches (the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the

1. W. A. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held at Amsterdam, August 22nd to September 4th, 1948.* (London: SCM Press Ltd), https://archive.org/details/wcca5/page/n5/mode/2up.

2. Sergew Habele Selassie, "The Establishment of the Ethiopian Church," https://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/prechristian.html.

Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church). The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church had been administratively part of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria from the first half of the 4th century until 1959, when it was granted autocephaly with its own patriarch by Pope Cyril VI of Alexandria, pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church.[3]

The four Historic Black Churches (denominations) at the WCC's 1st Assembly were the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ("Coloured" Methodist Episcopal Church in 1948).[4] Together, they represent close to 20 million adherents today.

While very few women were present at the 1st Assembly of the WCC as either delegates, consultants, or observers, there was a report given on behalf of women. It determined that more needed to be done to include women during the period before the next assembly and at the next assembly itself. Here again, the lack of representation reflects the colonial period in which the 1st Assembly was held and the social location of pan-Africa at that time.

This assembly in Amsterdam was organized into four sections to examine aspects of the theme "Man's disorder and God's design": 1) the universal church in God's design; 2) the church's witness to God's design; 3) the church and the disorder of society, and 4) the church and the international disorder.[5]

It is important to note that in the fourth section of the assembly, a report on race was presented by my central committee predecessor from the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. in 1939—the Rev. Dr Benjamin E. Mays. He was a delegate to the 1st Assembly and active in the International Missionary Council, the related stream leading up to the assembly and the establishment of the WCC, where he had already led a consultation on race in 1939. The fourth section of the 1948 assembly report, entitled "The Observance of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Should be Encouraged by Domestic and International Action," stated,

> We are profoundly concerned by evidence from many parts of the world of flagrant violations of human rights. Both individuals and groups are subjected to persecution and discrimination on grounds of race, colour, religion, culture or political conviction. Against such actions, whether of governments, officials, or the general public, the churches must take a firm and vigorous stand, through local action, in co-operation with churches in other lands, and through international institutions of legal order. They

3. "Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ethiopian-Orthodox-Tewahedo-Church.

4. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Church Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1990).

5. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly,* 5.

must work for an ever wider and deeper understanding of what are the essential human rights if men are to be free to do the will of God.[6]

The Message of the 1st Assembly of the WCC acknowledged that "we are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order, and tradition but also by pride of nation, class, and race. But Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided."[7] A total of five sections discussed this division, confession, and unity.

However, prior to this, in 1937, the Oxford Conference made a statement at a time when totalitarian states were insisting on their power and threatening the lives of many. The longer title of the report was "The Church and Community," and it included a section on "The Church and Race." It set forth the fundamental concepts of Christian race relations for subsequent ecumenical gatherings.[8] Additionally, two years later, in 1939, 11 German Christian pastors issued a statement supporting the racism of National Socialism (the "Declaration of Godesberg").[9] In the name of the WCC, then in the process of formation, Dr William Temple and Dr Marc Boegner, both chairmen of the Provisional Committee, along with Dr William Paton, secretary, and Dr W. A. Visser't Hooft issued a counter statement on the "Affirmation of Supra-Racial Character of the Church" that stated, "But recognition of the spiritual unity of all those who are in Christ, irrespective of race, nation or sex (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11) belongs to the essence of the Church. The Church is called to give clear and visible expressions to this unity."[10] This stance of the WCC theme and the four sections with related themes would shape and inform not only the 1st Assembly but the next assembly in 1954 in Evanston, Illinois, and thereafter.

Role and leadership of the WCC general secretary and the WCC assemblies

A key role in the WCC is that of the general secretary. The tone, substantive framing, and public face and accountability to the WCC membership is embodied in the general secretary and the related WCC staff team. This is alongside the authority of the WCC's member churches and its assembly, their governing officers, and the governance of its central committee between assemblies.

The legacy of leadership for this role was established by the first WCC general secretary, the Rev. Dr W.A. Visser't Hooft, who was born in 1900 in Haarlem in the Netherlands. He took up this role at age 38 and served from 1948 until 1966. Before becoming one of the founders of the WCC, he was involved with the Dutch

6. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly,* 93.

7. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly,* 9.

8. *Ecumenical Statements on Race Relations: Development of Ecumenical Thought on Race Relations 1937–1964,* Secretariat on Racial and Ethnic Relations, Department of Church and Society (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 9.

9. *Ecumenical Statements on Race Relations,* 13.

10. *Ecumenical Statements on Race Relations,* 14–17.

student Christian movement. During this time, he met Dr John Mott (YMCA) in 1925, when visiting in the USA at a young age, and he became interested in the "social gospel" movement. His interest found a place in the WSCF, where he became editor of their magazine, which had the motto *Ut Omnes Unum Sint* (That they may all be one).[11] He also became a part of the resistance against Nazism, and his apartment in Geneva became a meeting place for this movement.

Dr Visser 't Hooft also had the vision for the Ecumenical Institute at Château de Bossey. Bossey's mission is to educate and form church leaders, both clergy and lay, for service in parishes, classrooms, and ecumenical centres around the world. The Ecumenical Institute still plays a major role in shaping ecumenical thought through intercultural and interconfessional encounter, academic study in residential programmes, and common worship and life in community.[12] This includes PAWEEN/PAW today.

The life and contributions of Dr Visser 't Hooft were very important, not only to the formation of WCC and the global ecumenical movement but also to the pan-African women featured in this book. Many of the relationships he made before and during his leadership as WCC general secretary were key for the future leadership of many in the ecumenical movement, including the women in this book. His concern for the "social gospel movement" at that time, born in part because of his concern and voice during World War II before the founding of WCC, contributed to his leadership.

The pan-African women of faith in this book were affected by his leadership, both directly and indirectly, during their engagements in the WCC and before the formation of the WCC in the related streams that led up to the WCC. It was during the period of 1948–61 especially—which included the 1st Assembly, the 2nd Assembly in Evanston, Illinois, and the 3rd Assembly in New Delhi—where his direction and presence were felt.

2nd Assembly of the WCC, Evanston, Illinois, 1954

The 2nd Assembly of the WCC, held from 15–31 August 1954, was the only assembly to date held in the USA. The theme was "Christ—the hope of the world," and 161 national churches attended, compared to the 147 churches in Amsterdam. Like the 1st Assembly, the 2nd Assembly divided its work—this time into six sections: "1) Our oneness in Christ and our disunity as churches; 2) The mission of the church to those outside her life; 3) The responsible society in a world perspective; 4) Christians in the struggle for world community; 5) The churches amid racial and ethnic tension; and 6) The laity: the Christian in his

11. World Student Christian Federation, "The Federation: About Us."

12. Hans-Ruedi Weber (updated by Robert K. Welsh), *The Story of Bossey: A Laboratory for Ecumenical Life* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 149–67.

vocation."[13]

The assembly in Evanston provided the first opportunity for a full discussion of the attitude of the WCC's member churches on social and ethnic tensions. The 1st Assembly's reflections on race and the 1937 Oxford statement remained cornerstones for ecumenical thinking on the issue of racial justice as one of the issues related to these tensions.

The women in this book

All the women discussed in this book were related in some way to the churches and confessions present for this founding of WCC, but most were not there or were represented in some way. African women and women of African descent had a nominal presence at this founding assembly. This was still part of the colonial period in Africa as well as the Jim Crow colonial period in the USA, which most people of African descent were experiencing globally.

But at the same time, women of Africa and of African descent were still leading and evolving to be the trailblazers described in this book. One of these women was the Rev. Dr Rena Weller Karefa-Smart, born in the USA of Jamaican parentage, who was not only at the 1948 assembly but had a significant leadership role. She was not ordained at that time, but she provided substantive leadership. She is referred to in the assembly report as Mrs John Karefa-Smart of the Methodist Church in West Africa.[14] But she was also a daughter and member of the Historic Black Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), based in the United States. She was the only woman who wrote and led a worship service at the assembly, and she also took part in the process and spoke. Her story is one among the nine pan-African women of faith in this book whose presence was "ahead of her time" in the evolution of the modern ecumenical movement.

It is also important to note here that the Rev. Dr Philip Potter, who later became the first person of African descent to become general secretary of the WCC, was also present at this assembly. His Youth Delegation report was "heartily applauded."[15] He would become an important actor in the ecumenical seasons that followed, with pan-African women taking up their leadership place in the ecumenical movement during his tenure as director of the division of World Mission and Evangelism and, later, as general secretary of the WCC.

In Dr Potter's Youth Delegation report, he foretold some of this when he conveyed the prophecy of Joel, which states, "I shall pour forth my Spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your young men shall see visions and your old men dream dreams" (Joel 2:28). This scripture centred the discussion of the approximately 100 youth gathered at the 1948 assembly, who contributed

13. *The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1954* (London: SCM Press, 1955), *WCC Digital Archives,* https://archive.org/details/wcca7/page/n5/mode/2up.

14. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly.*

15. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly.*

to the report after having met since 20 August 1948. He also referenced the input of the second World Conference of Youth in Oslo, Norway, in 1947, in which a few of the women in this book participated. He also announced the intent for a third World Conference of Christian Youth in Asia, along with the YMCA, YWCA, WSCF, and others. Further, he insisted on more representation of laymen and laywomen and that young people be included as delegates as well as guests.[16] Here, again, his later leadership becomes an important factor in the rise of the women leading "ahead of their time."

Rev. Dr Rena Weller Karefa-Smart—visionary, ecumenist, pastor, theologian, and scholar

> *The need for the Christian community to become an inclusive family with a full experience of true Christian fellowship as its vitalizing force is as urgent as the need for indigenization. (John Karefa-Smart and Rena Karefa-Smart)*[17]

> *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom. 15:7)*

The encounter

I had my initial encounter with the Rev. Dr Rena Weller Karefa-Smart when I arrived for my first year of graduate study for the Master of Divinity degree in the hallowed halls of Yale University Divinity School (YDS). She was the first woman of African descent to graduate from YDS, in 1945. Regarding the significance of this and who Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart was, it is helpful to cite the historic location of her attendance and graduation as well as how my encounter with her took place. YDS's history began with the founding of Yale University in 1701. According to its website,

> Training for the Christian ministry was a main purpose in the founding of Yale College in 1701. As expressed in its original charter, it was to be a school "wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts & Sciences who through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State."[18]

16. Philip Potter, "Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophesy," *in At Home with God and in the World: A Philip Potter Reader,* ed. Andrea Frochtling, Michael Jagessar, Brian Brown, Rudolf Hinz, and Dietrich Werner (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 153–59.

17. John Karefa-Smart and Rena Karefa-Smart, *The Halting Kingdom: Christianity and the African Revolution* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 72.

18. Bulletin of Yale University, Divinity School 2023–2024, https://catalog.yale.edu/div/nature-divinity-school/history-divinity-school/.

As Yale University grew over the next three centuries, it continued to recognize this history and increase its facilities for training for religious service. However, in 1822, a shift occurred. Students of theology petitioned to be recognized as a distinct group, and a professorship in theology was established, marking the formation of what became YDS.

Today the mission statement at YDS is the following:

> The mission of the Divinity School is to foster the knowledge and love of God through rigorous scholarly inquiry, the preparation of students for lives of transformative service, the promotion of broad inclusivity and diversity in our communal life, encounter with the sacred through music and the arts, and the advancement of the sustainability of the earth. Traditionally and primarily Christian in character, the school welcomes persons of all faiths and those of no faith.[19]

Although I have and continue to embrace the spirit of the first YDS mission statement and the renewed mission statement of YDS today which flows from the 1701 mission statement, it has taken from 1945 to 2023 for a portrait of the first African or woman of African descent who embodied these principles to be hung there. This, however, is congruent with the absence of affirmation of women's presence and visibility during the time Dr Karefa-Smart was a student and even years later. Indeed, her presence was considered disruptive when she was there, as Katharine Q. Seelye noted in her obituary in the *New York Times*: "Because she was black, she was not allowed to live on campus and had to stay in a boarding house, which made it harder for her to feel a sense of belonging."[20]

Another visible indicator of this historical lack of inclusion and embrace—and not just at YDS, but at many, if not most, seminary and university divinity schools globally—is seen in the halls of graduation pictures. During my first stroll at YDS, I noted the dominant presence of white men in the graduating classes from the very beginning. Still, I wondered if there were any people of Africa or African descent, especially before the 1960s and 1970s. I found a few men, and as I went back further, I finally found Ms Bernice Cosey Pulley, who graduated in 1955 and became the second woman of African descent to graduate from YDS. But then I decided to look more closely, just to make sure I hadn't missed anyone else. I was very surprised to find Ms Rena Weller Karefa-Smart in another place before she later became Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart! I was a bit dumbfounded, but as I was taught in my Black church upbringing, "God is able!"

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19. "Mission & History: Yale Divinity School Mission Statement," Yale Divinity School website, https://divinity.yale.edu/about-yds/mission-history.

20. Katharine Q. Seelye, "Rena Karefa-Smart, 97, Leader in Ecumenical Movement, Is Dead," *New York Times*, 1 February 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/obituaries/rena-karefa-smart-97-dead.html.

I began to search for her and Mrs Bernice Cosey Pulley, and I found both. This was the beginning of my sacred journey and encounters with both. In 2023, Mrs Cosey Pulley passed away, and Dr Karefa-Smart passed away in 2019. They both became dear mentors to me and lifelong friends.

The pioneering roles of Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart

> Given the context of African-American oppression and its implications for the mission of the Church of Christ Uniting, a more developed ecumenical morality of the New Creation needs to be the shaper of common life in the covenant community. The churches have a vocation that requires a prophetic response to the communities they represent, one that is informed by the insights gleaned through a hermeneutic of contrition, a deeper penitential spirituality, and multiple strategies more nuanced in their application to all dimensions of justice.[21]

Dr Karefa-Smart is probably best known for her pioneering roles at YDS and Harvard University Divinity School and for becoming a global ecumenical leader in places like the WCC.

But she also came from a modest and diverse pan-African background, into which she was born and married. She was the granddaughter of Fannie M. Lawry, who had been born into slavery. Her mother, Rosa Lee, graduated from Benedict College, a historically Black US women's college in Columbia, South Carolina. Her father was an African Methodist Episcopal Zion pastor who was a Jamaican immigrant. She married a man from Sierra Leone, lived there after their marriage, and then returned to the USA while maintaining connections with her roots with her Caribbean heritage and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (also known as the Freedom Church.) While in Sierra Leone, she also connected with the Methodist Church there.

She was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, a Historic Black Church based in New York City, also known as the Freedom Church. The AMEZ Church had its beginnings in the late 1700s but was not officially recognized until 1821. Like other Historic Black Churches in the USA, discrimination and segregation in white Methodism led to the creation of independent churches. In this case, the first church was built in New York in 1800 after disagreements about equitable relationship with their white counterparts. The church has also come to be called the "Zion" church. People like the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the women's suffrage leader Sojourner Truth and the freedom leader of the Underground Railroad Harriet Tubman were associated

21. Rena Karefa-Smart, "COCU and the African-American Presence: The Relationship Between Justice and Unity in the Church Christ Uniting, USA," *Mid-Stream*, 34 no 3 Jul–Oct 1995, 49.

with this church.[22]

Like her father, Evangelist Tubman, lay ministers Frederick Douglas, and Sojourner Truth, Dr Karefa-Smart emerged in her ministry as a pastoral leader who travelled with her ministry in the USA and globally. She also became an ordained elder and a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church based in the USA, which is an ordained denominational district church leader role, later in her ministry. She also later affiliated with the Episcopal Church in the USA. While she moved around nationally and globally in her adult years, this was a familiar way of life for her. In her young years with her family, they moved together with the AMEZ church. Her family moved often due to Methodist itinerant assignments within the AMEZ Church in the northeast of the United States. Despite the racism and sexism she faced in the 1930s and 1940s, Dr Karefa-Smart still managed to skip two grades in public school, become a member of the National Honor Society, and enter college at the age of 15. All of this put her "ahead of her time" in those days.[23]

Before entering YDS in 1942, she had already received her bachelor's degree in education in 1940 from the Teachers College of Connecticut (now the Central Connecticut State University) and a master's degree in religious education from Drew Theological Seminary in New Jersey in 1942. She then taught for two years at the Hood Theological Seminary in North Carolina. While at YDS, her principal professor was H. Richard Niebuhr, the brother of Reinhold Niebuhr. Her mentor was Dr Niebuhr's associate, Dr Liston Pope, who carried out empirical studies on labour and race relations. Later, with his encouragement, she started a doctoral programme in the sociology of religion at Harvard Divinity School.

She married Dr John Albert Musselman Karefa-Smart, a politician, medical doctor, and university professor. He also served as the first foreign minister under Sierra Leone's first prime minister, Milton Margai. He was ordained an elder of the United Methodist Church. Together and separately, they wrote books, articles, and spoke at many global faith, political, and social events. They influenced generations. One of the best known books they wrote together was *The Halting Kingdom: Christianity and the African Revolution* in 1959. This ground-breaking work was important during the season of historic momentum for independence of African nations and still provides pertinent historic and interdisciplinary insight for today.

Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart's writings and speeches span over more than seven decades, from 1942 to 2019. The themes of her work addressed ecumenism, mission, unity, and diversity, pan-African viewpoints, women in mission, and ministry. She was a WCC central committee member and wrote the liturgy

22. Sabrianna Sgambelluri, "African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church (1821–)," *Black Past,* 16 July 2018, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/african-methodist-episcopal-zion-amez-church-1821/.

23. Seelye, "Rena Karefa-Smart."

and participated in the leadership of the liturgy on 2 September 1948 at the 1st Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam, the theme of which was "Man's disorder and God's design."[24] She was also present for the WCC central committee and Faith and Order Commission meeting at her alma mater, YDS, in 1957. There, she also worked with her mentor, Dr Liston Pope, in hosting the meeting.

Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart was also nominated to be a president of the WCC at the assembly in Uppsala in 1961. The nomination came out of a debate that Dr Pauline Webb described as "acrimonious." Women were very vocal about the importance of their voices and presence being heard and felt during the assembly. This assembly had the most women present of any since the founding of the WCC. Two attempts were made to substitute women for men in the role of WCC president. Janet Crawford shares the following:

> There was a proposal for Mrs Rena Karefa-Smart to be the substitute for the nomination of the Rev. John Coventry Smith who was moderator of the general assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. Her nomination was ruled out of order because both she and Dr D. T. Niles of the Methodist Church of Ceylon, who was already nominated on the slate, were Methodists and two Methodists would have upset the confessional balance. If Dr Karefa-Smart had been elected, she would have represented three groups: women, laity, and Africans. All three of these were lacking on the presidium, but the confessional balance was seen as the overriding factor.[25]

Not only was her ecumenical leadership and graduation historic, so was her scholarship. Another of her most important works was her ThD thesis at Harvard Divinity School, titled "An Analysis of Representative Official Statements by the World Council of Churches on the Problem of Race": "The argument for the thesis was that the discrepancy between word and deed is a consequence of deficiencies in method which adversely affect the churches' understanding, motivation, and their capacity for devising and implementing consensually based, effective anti-racism policies."[26]

Other major ecumenical engagements she was a part of in the 1940s included officer of the United Christian Youth Movement; co-chair of the second World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo in 1947; and advisor and plenary speaker at the 2nd Assembly of the WCC in Evanston, where she spoke about Africa's

24. Visser't Hooft, *The First Assembly.*

25. Janet Crawford, "From Partnership to Liberation: The Uppsala Assembly and Women's Involvement in the World Council of Churches," *Ecumenical Review* 70:2 (2018), 228–46.

26. Rena Karefa-Smart, "An Analysis of Representative Official Statements by the World Council of Churches on the Problem of Race," Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations, *Harvard Theological Review* 69:3-4 (1976).

growing sense of independence. In the 1960s, she was president of the Sierra Leone Federation of Women's Organizations; organizing secretary for the WCC Conference on Racism in Notting Hill, London; and coordinator of racism issues at the 4th Assembly of the WCC. In the 1970s, she was a commissioner for the WCC Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and coordinator of the preparatory meetings for delegates from Black churches to the WCC's 5th Assembly. She was also a delegate to the WCC's 6th Assembly in 1983, and later in the 1980s she was the convenor of the Faith and Order Task Force on the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry study and follow-up with the Metropolitan Council of Churches of Greater Washington, DC.

In sum, she accepted the invitation to be at home in the devotional, liturgical, and scholarly legacy of the Christian churches. She carried this out in her writings and oral presentation. Indeed, she felt at home speaking on the diversity of issues of her time, being a scholar, presiding elder/pastor, wife, and mother. As Katharine Seelye noted in her obituary, "Today her legacy is to be celebrated for her historic contributions to church history and ecumenical life. Dr Karefa-Smart died at the age of 97."[27]

Dr Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye—scholar, WCC deputy secretary, and founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

> *You (God), call us to the need to face the impunity with which we violate the humanity of others. How right you are. We are promising ourselves a new day. We have begun with gender-sensitivity and gender equity. If only the churches will develop awareness of women's perspectives, involvements and contribution we would not lose so much potential. (Mercy Oduyoye)*[28]
>
> *She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. (Prov. 3:15).*

The encounter

I first encountered Dr Mercy Oduyoye when I was a young adult, on the second day of my arriving at the 7th Assembly of the WCC, in Canberra, Australia, held 7–20 February 1991. The theme was "Come Holy Spirit: Renew thy creation." She was already a matriarch in the ecumenical movement, serving as the deputy general secretary of the WCC. She had served as the first youth education secretary of the WCC, youth secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches in the Ibadan office (Nigeria), president of the WSCF, and she founded

27. Seelye, "Rena Karefa-Smart."

28. Mercy Oduyoye, "Together on the Way: From Cover to Core: A Letter to my Ancestors," WCC 50th Anniversary-8th Assembly (World Council of Churches, 1998).

the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989.

One of the delegate assignments I learned about on the second day of the assembly was the Programme Policy Committee. The task of this committee was to review the Vancouver to Canberra report and recommend future work in the areas of unity, mission, ecumenical relations, public witness, *diakonia,* ecumenical formation, and other crosscutting issues. I wasn't exactly aware of what this meant but found out upon my arrival at the meeting. Our moderator, Bishop Soritua Albert Ernst Nababan from Indonesia, and vice-moderator, Rev. Nélida Ritchie, who later became a Methodist bishop in Argentina, welcomed me to the meeting. After looking over the room, they determined that a young person should be the rapporteur. Their eyes went straight to me! I quickly learned the importance of the work and my new role as the scribe of the report. The task was to listen, contribute, write, and present the committee's review of the report. My "baptism by fire" in serving in the role was kindly eased by the generous mentoring of Dr Oduyoye. It was then that I had my first lesson on her amazing gifts, which would be my first instalment of many lessons over the years.

Another one of these lessons has been recognizing the importance of faith and public formation that Dr Oduyoye experienced when she was a part of the WSCF. This movement also gave space for many other young adults over time. This included young faith leaders from Africa and the African diaspora. When Dr Oduyoye was a young adult, a pan-African faith engagement from the various African and African diaspora countries was also linked to the independence movements of Africa and the Pan-African Congresses.

With its regional and global focus of engagement, WSCF was able to maintain regional and local bases that organized regionally and throughout Africa. For example, other notable ecumenical and pan-African leaders of the WSCF were President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; President Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania; southern freedom fighters Steve Biko and Oliver Tambo of South Africa; former WCC general secretaries, Rev. Dr Philip Potter and Rev. Dr Sam Kobia; and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia. All were shaped by Christian churches or schools and exercised their faith through church and public engagement during the season of independence of the countries they represented. People like President Nkrumah and President Nyerere were leaders in the Pan-African Congresses discussed above.

At the same time, the WSCF had other notable leaders whose faith and public formation were shaped by WSCF, a cadre that Dr Oduyoye belonged to in her earlier and later years of her work. People like Rev. Dr Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary of the WCC; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian-activist; Bishop K. H. Ting, a Chinese bishop who led the movement for the China Christian Council to be a part of the WCC; Archbishop Anders Wejryd; Canadian senator Lois Miriam Wilson; and Frère Roger of the Taizé community.

Dr Oduyoye, like Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart, was the daughter of a Methodist pastor, Rev. Charles Kwaw Yamoah, who was also an educator. He was a president

of the Methodist Church in Ghana. Her mother, Mrs Mercy Dakwaa (Turkson) Yamoah, was also a strong leader in the family, church, and community. Dr Oduyoye was thus born and raised in a matrilineal family lineage in Ghana, where women played a key role in the family. This included the passing on of names from this lineage. All her eight siblings, male and female, completed post-secondary studies. However, she married into a patrilineal family of the Yoruba community in Nigeria.

She has shared that these experiences, African theology, and related impressions of African women and African culture influenced her greatly.

The three phases of Dr Oduyoye

In Christina Landman's timely article on Dr Oduyoye's life and teachings, titled *Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Mother of Our Stories*, she refers to three phases in the story of Dr Oduyoye: 1) 1953–1973: her training and teaching; 2) 1974–94: her critical and analytical reflection on patriarchal cultures and practices and their influence on church women's lives; and 3) starting in 1995 with the publication of *Daughters of Anowa*, her shift from woman theologian as social critic to the woman theologian as society's healer. Dr Landman also identifies three themes that "blatantly" present themselves in Dr Oduyoye's publications: gender, ecumenism, and restorative historiography.[29]

The focus of this book includes all three of the themes, but especially the theme of ecumenism. In this same article, Dr Landman cites the following quote from Dr Oduyoye: "It was SCM [Students Christian Movement] connections that got me to Geneva (as deputy general secretary of the WCC) and SCM formed Modupe Oduyoye, the Nigerian SCM General Secretary, who became my spouse."[30]

In 1987 she founded the ecumenical Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which was and is a space for African women theologians to express their thoughts academically. It has led to numerous publications, the pan-African conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1997, and a later conference in 2003 in South Africa on the theme of "Women as the Church," which led to the book *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*.[31]

The WCC had a role in all these occasions. In 1982, Dr Oduyoye published an article in the book *Voices of Unity*, which consisted of essays in honour of Dr W. A. Visser't Hooft. The article focuses on ecumenism in Africa. She also critiques white mission churches that send endless personnel to Africa that uphold their positions while ecumenism is embraced. These are only highlights of the prolific

29. Christina Landman, "Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Mother of Our Stories," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33:1 (2007), 187–204.

30. Landman, "Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye."

31. Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Apawo Phiri, eds, *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

ecumenical work of Dr Oduyoye.

It also needs to be said that her teaching and mentoring of pan-African women like her have been pioneering. Books of tribute by these women express this. Two of these works are *African Women, Religion, and Health*[32] and a comprehensive book on the Circle that celebrates Dr Oduyoye's founding role, titled *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007*.[33]

32. Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Apawo Phiri, eds, *African Women, Religion and Health* (Ossining: Orbis Books, 2006).

33. Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedle, *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* 1989–2007 (Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2017).

Chapter Three

1961–1975: WCC's Assemblies and the Increasing Pan-African Presence Felt Globally

1960: A consultation of WCC member churches, Cottesloe, South Africa

The 1961–75 period was a very volatile one. One event that sparked this period occurred in 1960. The place was South Africa, where the anti-apartheid movement was gaining attention and visibility. In March 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre happened near Vereeniging, South Africa. Police fired on a crowd of Black people, killing or wounding some 250 of them, marking "one of the first and most violent demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa."[1] A four-month national state of emergency followed. This would have major significance for the churches going forward.

The response of the officers of WCC was that they felt a statement would not be helpful. Rather, they thought it would be useful to send WCC representatives to South Africa on a mission of fellowship and consultation. The South African churches welcomed this, and "The Statement of the Cottesloe Consultation on December 7–14, 1960" was the result. "The delegates agreed on the adoption of the Cottesloe Statement, which rejected unjust discrimination in various forms and made several specific resolutions with respect to such issues as freedom of religion, migrant work, and due process."[2]

But there was a split response on the recommendations of the consultation. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa for example, rejected the Cottesloe Statement as too theologically liberal, even though DRC theologians had been represented at the consultation and had agreed to the statement.[3]

1. "Sharpeville Massacre," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* https://www.britannica.com/event/Sharpeville-massacre.

2. Stuart C. Bate, *Evangelisation in the South African Context* (Gregorian and Biblical Press, 1991), 13.

3. J. Kevin Livingston, *A Missiology of the Road: Early Perspectives in David Bosch's Theology of Mission and Evangelism* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 33.

3rd Assembly of the WCC, New Delhi, India, 1961

Events immediately prior to the 3rd Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961 affected the assembly's discussions and outcomes. General Secretary Dr W. A. Visser't Hooft gave a presentation on "The Calling of the World Council of Churches," at the outset of the assembly. He sought to interpret the main developments during the seven years since the 2nd Assembly in Evanston. He noted the increasing activities of the WCC and identified old issues and new emerging ones that should be addressed at this 3rd Assembly. At the same time, he called for a deeper unity of the churches as the membership of WCC grew.

He described the WCC as a body "of considerable fragility" because of its youth, the diversity of the membership, and its free association of the members. He stated:

> The first years of its life have fallen within one of the most troubled periods of history, in which ideological, inter-continental and inter-racial conflicts create acute tensions which have a bearing not only on international relations but also on the relations of churches and therefore on the life of the World Council itself. Despite all this the World Council continues to live and grow, . . . That we are allowed to assemble today as participants in a movement which is very much alive is due to that mysterious Will that constrains us to hold on to each other despite all that divides us.[4]

He summarized his presentation in three points: "1) the recognition that 'hitherto has the Lord helped us,' 2) the challenge to 'enlarge the place of thy tent,' and 3) the call 'with one voice to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'"[5]

The assembly also included the gift of a special secretariat that was set up by Pope John XXIII. The purpose of the secretariat was to promote the unity of Christendom. Five observers were authorized to represent the secretariat.

The assembly received the largest number of new members to be received at any one time since the inaugural assembly of the WCC in 1948. This included 11 applications from newly independent churches in Africa. Two applications were churches from the Islands of the Pacific, which were also the first from the region. Two were Pentecostal churches from South America, representing the first members of the Pentecostal family. New members also included those from Orthodox churches from Eastern Europe: the Orthodox Church of Russia, the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church of Romania, and the Orthodox Church of Poland.

This season included the presentation of "The Challenge to the Churches in

4. *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1961), https://archive.org/details/wcca11.

5. *The New Delhi Report.*

the New Nations of Africa and Asia." This was a timely topic for Mr M. M. Thomas, associate director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society at Bangalore, who was from the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar.

There was also a resolution on race entitled "Race and Ethnic Relations," which was adopted with no dissenting voice. This was a follow-up to a principle announced at the WCC assembly in Evanston that affirmed that any form of segregation based on race, colour, or ethnic origin is contrary to the gospel. The New Delhi resolution went further and called attention to mounting tensions on this while showing appreciation for an effective witness of many Christians in these difficult situations. Still, it encouraged the churches "to act more resolutely against 'segregation based on race, color or ethnic origin.'"[6]

1963: Independence of African Churches, All Africa Conference of Churches, the Organization of African Unity and Caribbean Conference of Churches

In 1958, churches of Africa met together in Ibadan, Nigeria, for the first time. At this time, the establishment of a permanent organization of the church of Africa was introduced. It is important to note here again that while many of the churches were founded during the colonial missionary period, some ancient churches of Africa were not. I mentioned these in the discussion of the 1948 assembly.

> The All-Africa Christian Conference, also known as the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), was formed in April 1963 during the second meeting of the Assembly of the Churches of Africa held in Kampala, Uganda. This ended the missionary era and ushered in the independence of African Churches. The third meeting of the Churches of Africa met in 1969 during the Second Assembly. Since then, the Assembly has met in 1974; 1981; 1987; 1992; 1997 and 2003.[7]

The Organization of African Unity was founded not long after the Ibadan meeting. In May 1963, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 32 African states met with the goal of bringing these newly independent African nations together to address mutual issues in Africa and resolve the issues within the continent. Alieu Ebrima Cham Joof, the late Gambian historian and a leading Gambian nationalist and pan-Africanist at the time, delivered the following speech to the member states:

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6. *Ecumenical Statements on Race Relations.*

7. Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, "The Ecumenical Movement and Development: The Case of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), 1963–2000 (Part 1)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44:3 (2018), 1–15.

> It is barely 75 years when the European Powers sat around the table in Germany each holding a dagger to carve up Africa for its own benefit. . . . Your success will inspire and speed up the freedom and total independence of the African continent and eradicate imperialism and colonialism from the continent and eventually neo-colonialism from the globe. . . . Your failure, which no true African in Africa is praying for, will prolong our struggle with bitterness and disappointment. I, therefore, adjure that you ignore any suggestion outside Africa and holding that the present civilization, which some of the big powered are boasting of, sprang up from Africa, and realizing that the entire world has something earthly to learn from Africa, you would endeavour your utmost to come to an agreement, save Africa from the clutches of neo-colonialism and resurrect African dignity, manhood, and national stability.[8]

This movement for independence and unity among African peoples was also being felt in the Caribbean. By 1973, the Caribbean Conference of Churches had grown out of Christian Action for Development in the Caribbean. The founding assembly of the Caribbean Conference of Churches took place in Kingston, Jamaica. The preamble of its constitution stated:

> We, as Christian people of the Caribbean, because of our common calling in Christ, covenant to join together in a regional fellowship of churches for theological reflection, inspiration, consultation, and cooperative action, to overcome the challenges created by history, language, culture, class and distance. We are therefore deeply committed to promoting peace, the holistic development of our people and affirming social justice and the dignity of all persons. We pledge to journey together in Christ and to share our experiences for the strengthening of the kingdom of God in the world.[9]

The Caribbean Conference of Churches represents a diverse history of peoples and cultures with an interrelatedness with South and Central America. The region is made up of islands and mainland areas with four major languages (English, Spanish, French, and Dutch). But despite their diversity and historic divisions from their colonial streams, they have affirmed a unifying Caribbean identity with a focus on their response to God's will for them.

This changing context for freedoms not found under the colonial era and

8. Quoted in Keifala Kanneh, "The Struggle of a Begging Bowl Continent and Its Colossal Failure and Disappointment: The Case With Africa," *Modern* Ghana, visited 11 October 2023, https://www.modernghana.com/news/974896/the-struggle-of-a-begging-bowl-continent-and-its.html.

9. "Caribbean Conference of Churches," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/organization/caribbean-conference-of-churches.

its related events would significantly increase the voices and visible presence of pan-African peoples in the life of the ecumenical movement between the WCC assemblies of 1961 and 1968. This voice and presence would find climactic moments with pan-African women and men of faith, who would provide transformative leadership not only in their churches but in their countries.

1966: A new WCC general secretary—Eugene Carson Blake

Rev. Dr Eugene Carson Blake not only spoke of his commitment to social justice, but also acted. Before he became WCC general secretary in 1966 (two years prior to the WCC assembly in Uppsala), Dr Carson Blake had already served as the former president of the National Council of Churches in the United States, marched with Rev. Dr Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights battle and been arrested with him, served as stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church, and was co-author of the 1953 "Letter to Presbyterians" denouncing McCarthyism. He was known as the "Protestant Pope."[10]

In his 1953 "Letter to the Presbyterians," he stated:

> A still greater obligation is to make sure that what we mean by security, and the methods we employ to achieve it, are in accordance with the will of God. Otherwise, any human attempt to establish a form of world order which does no more than exalt the interest of a class, a culture, a race, or a nation, above God and the interests of the whole human family, is foredoomed to disaster.[11]

He also had a regard for the Social Creed of 1908 that framed the work of what became the National Councils of Churches in the USA.[12] He was a part of the creation of the December 1960 proposal for church union among the four "mainline" Protestant churches, and he worked with other ecumenical leaders to create a new Social Creed for the 21st century to strengthen ecumenical Christian witness and action today.

4th Assembly of the WCC, Uppsala, Sweden, 1968

The 4th Assembly of the WCC, held in Uppsala from 4 to 20 July 1968, reflected Rev. Dr Carson Blake's commitment to the church and its prophetic, priestly, and pastoral role in the world.

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10. John Dart, "Rights Leader and Ecumenist E. C. Blake Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 August 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-08-01-mn-4297-story.html.

11. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: A Letter to Presbyterians,* Fifth Series-Volume III-1954, https://justiceunbound.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Letter-to-Presbyterians.pdf.

12. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.*

> With 704 delegates and 2,000 other participants, it was the largest such WCC assembly since the founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. For the WCC, the 1960s had been a time of growth, during which 36 churches were admitted as members and nine as associate members. By 1965, all the autocephalous and autonomous Eastern Orthodox churches had become members, thus greatly strengthening the Orthodox presence at the Uppsala assembly.[13]

The assembly had a growing focus on women, given the increased numbers and presence of women. More women attended the assembly in Uppsala than previous assemblies, but they still made up only 11 percent of the total participation and 9 percent of the voting delegates.[14] Vatican II also brought Catholic observers to participate in the meeting and to discuss further opportunities for cooperation. Sections were organized under the headings: "The Holy Spirit and the catholicity of the church; Renewal in mission; World economic and social development; Towards justice and peace in international affairs; Worship; and Towards new styles of living."[15]

But these deliberations at the 4th Assembly still happened in a time of major social upheaval, as they had in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II. This upheaval was now spotlighted not only in Europe but in the world. This included the so-called "third world," reflecting the advance of the independence movements of nations and churches in Africa and the increasing demands of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, as well as other related pan-African movements.

Given Rev. Dr Carson Blake's history and this push from the "third world" in these contexts—not only outside but also in the USA—the new general secretary invited Rev. Dr Martin Luther King to be a keynote presenter in Uppsala. Tragically, Rev. Dr Martin King was martyred before the assembly was held on 4 April 1968. The writer and civil rights leader Mr James Baldwin spoke in his place, but a black-draped seat on the stage communicated a visual memory of Rev. Dr Martin Luther King as one of his speeches was also shared with the delegates.

On the recommendation of Policy Reference Committee II, the WCC assembly resolved by a standing vote to recognize the faithful leadership of Rev. Dr Martin Luther King. The assembly expressed its deep sense of loss brought about because of his martyrdom. It gave thanks for his faithful and prophetic witness to the commandment of love and non-violence as a tool for social change

13. *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Uppsala, July 4th-20th 1968* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), *WCC Digital Archive,* https://archive.org/details/wcca14.

14. Janet Crawford, "From Partnership to Liberation: The Uppsala Assembly and Women's Involvement in the World Council of Churches," *Ecumenical Review* 70:2 (2018), 228–46.

15. World Council of Churches, "About the WCC," https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies.

and encouraged the member churches to model his example of Christian witness. Further reflections on this can be found in the Reports of Sections III, IV and VI in the Assembly Report.[16]

1972: A new general secretary—Rev. Dr Philip Potter

With the dramatic changes happening with African peoples in Africa and throughout the African diaspora, the Rev. Dr Philip Potter, born in 1921 in Domenica and a son of the earliest beginnings of the ecumenical movement, emerged to global ecumenical leadership. As he said in 1948, he was committed to young voices and to the scripture found in the prophecy of Joel: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28).

From 1972 to 1984, Rev. Dr Potter was WCC general secretary with this vision of ensuring the inclusion of pan-African women of faith and of supporting their taking up more roles, both as ordained and lay women in their churches and in the public globally.

Potter was quintessentially a Caribbean thinker who comes from a region that Gordan K. Lewis states is "shaped by the architectonic forces of conquest, colonization, slavery, sugar monoculture, colonialism, and racial and ethnic admixture."[17] Dr Potter said in his writings, "The [Caribbean] region was the testing ground of colonialism, imperialism and capitalist racism."[18] In the anthology of Dr Potter's writings, *At Home with God and in the World*, Michael Jagessar points to the significance of these observations but also adds that this context and Caribbean identity were wedded to Dr Potter's working life outside of the Caribbean. He refers to Dr Potter's words in his "Full Life or All Writing": "It is reasonable to consider him as a missionary in Europe."[19]

Dr Potter served as the first Black Student Christian Movement Overseas Secretary for Britain and Ireland, and secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society for West Africa and the Caribbean and the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. Cyril Davey points out that "while there was the recognition of the need to include people from the 'mission field,' Potter served in these key positions primarily because of his abilities, charisma, and qualifications."[20]

From 1972 to 1984, the ecumenical movement birthed the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and increased dialogue and programmatic initiatives with a life and work focus and missional direction. This sought to encourage support

16. *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report.*

17. Gordan K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought* (Kingston: Heinemann, 1983), 3.

18. Philip Potter, *Life in All Its Fullness* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 141.

19. Michael N. Jagessar, *Full Life for All: The Work and Theology of Philip A. Potter* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 72.

20. Cyril Davey, *Changing Places: Methodist Mission Then and Now (*Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988), 20.

for a more inclusive WCC staff and governance representation. These initiatives were embraced and critiqued globally. In the USA, for example, there were those inside and outside the ecumenical movement who were supportive, but others, like CBS's "60 Minutes" television show, encouraged scrutiny of these initiatives. At the same time, Potter—like his predecessors who, with the central committee who elected him, welcomed him to the assembly hall after his election—was called to ecumenical leadership that energized the movement of inclusiveness, including of pan-African women of faith.

5th Assembly of the WCC, Nairobi, Kenya, 1975

The 5th Assembly of the WCC reflected the presence of Dr Potter as its new general secretary. His long-term presence in the ecumenical movement, since the early days of the WSCF and many years after, made him a familiar leader for the ecumenical movement. He, like his predecessors, also brought his unique devotion and impassioned commitment to the churches and their prophetic, priestly, and pastoral roles in the world.

The assembly was held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 23 November to 10 December 1975. The original hope had been to hold the assembly in Jakarta, Indonesia, but the large numbers anticipated by the gathering made it challenging for the WCC to go there. Nairobi was and is the headquarters of the All Africa Conference of Churches. Africa was highly visible at the assembly and the first historic plenary addressing the sub-theme of "Women in a changing world" was also highlighted. Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot played a key role in navigating the tensions and opportunities this discussion brought relative to the overall theme, which was "Jesus Christ frees and unites!"

By this time, the WCC had 285 member churches. The delegates sang and welcomed Nairobi's life of faith and divine possibilities despite disunities within the ecumenical movement globally. Here, again, the assembly addressed concerns of another challenging period. The highlights of the assembly report state they addressed 1) Confessing Christ today; 2) What unity requires; 3) Seeking community; 4) Education for liberation and community; 5) Structures of injustice and struggles for liberation; and 6) Human development.[21] The closing message, which was also an invitation to prayer, stated:

> Representatives of many church traditions and cultures, we gathered in Nairobi, Kenya. In a continent determined to be free, and moved by the joy with which African Christians celebrate the Lord, we tried to respond to the needs of the world. We had more representatives of the six continents than before and more women, young people, and laity. For eighteen days,

21. David M. Paton, *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), WCC Digital Archive, https://archive.org/details/wcca17/page/n13/mode/2up.

> we gathered under our common theme: Jesus Christ frees and unites. Listening to one another, we experienced the joy of unity across the barriers of culture and race, sex and class; we also experienced the pain of these deep divisions. Deliberation on our common witness in Bible study and prayer, in informal small group and large formal meeting, brought us closer together. Ideology and sharp contrasts in opinion and commitment pulled us apart.[22]

This growing diversity, which was the widest at that point for any assembly, had 676 voting delegates. The assembly report states;

> 107 were Africans, 92 Asians, 147 West Europeans, 97 East Europeans, 137 North Americans, 21 Latin Americans, 9 from the Caribbean, 42 from Australasia and the Pacific, and 20 from the Middle East. Of the 676, 152 were women (22 percent; Uppsala 9 percent), 62 under 30 years of age (9%; Uppsala 4% under 35), and 389 were clergy (42%; Uppsala 25%) and 287 lay. For about 80% of delegates Nairobi was their first WCC Assembly.[23]

The women were rising—before, during, and after the assembly. The assembly directly addressed the issues of social exclusion by and of some. I will discuss a number of women who were important to this new season.

Justice Annie Jiagge—judge, orator, and relentless voice for justice

> *Injustice eats me internally. I get very restless when I come in touch with it. (Judge Annie Jiagge)*
>
> *What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! (Rom. 9:14)*

In the opening statement of a 1968 interview by Rotarian International with Judge Annie Jiagge from her Ghanaian home, she said, "It's *wonderful* to be a woman . . . to remain a woman! There's no excuse for killing your nature as a woman."[24]

I did not have the honoured opportunity to meet Judge Jiagge, but her legendary presence went before me, and I have heard legends of her in my quest to know pan-African women of faith in the global ecumenical movement. I came to imagine her as "Sophia of her time," whose charismas and stature reflected her

22. Paton, *Breaking barriers,* 15.

23. Paton, *Breaking barriers,* 20.

24. Abe Halperin and Edith Halperin, "It's Wonderful to Be a Woman," *The Rotarian* 112:2 (February 1968), https://books.google.co.za/books?id=1zMEAAAAMBAJ.

resolve, resistance, and resilience to pursue her calling of not only uplifting the dignity of women expressed in the quote but justice for all. I discovered through oral and written accounts the strong faith, family, and multicultural education and values that supported and shaped her calling. They expose the charisma that gave way to the courage it took for her to be the kind of bold ecumenical and global trailblazer she was. Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, former WCC general secretary, in his WCC tribute to her on 27 June 1996, said, "Annie was an important personality in our orbit, and we valued her wise counsel."[25]

Justice Jiagge was a Presbyterian laywoman and the daughter of a Presbyterian minister associated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Rev. Robert Domingo Baëta, and a schoolteacher, Mrs Henrietta Baëta. She was born into and belonged to the Ewe ethnic group of south-eastern Ghana and Togo. She received an English education in the coastal town of Keta (then in British Togoland) while living with her maternal grandmother. She then attended Achimota School (later Achimota College) and earned her teacher's certificate in 1937.

Achimota School, located in Accra, Ghana, was opened in 1927. It has educated many African leaders, including three heads of state in Ghana, President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and the first head of state of the Gambia. The school was founded on the premise "That All May be One" (*Ut Omnes Unum Sint*), where Black and white, male and female, should integrate. Although the radical idea of an integrated school of this sort was bold in the 1920s, the founders of the school had a vision to produce a class of intellectual bi-cultural leaders whose training would enable them to act as interpreters and brokers for European and African ideas, capable of taking over their (British) governments when they would need to leave. Ahead of its time, the idea was simultaneously idealistic and radical.[26]

She was headmistress and schoolteacher at the Evangelical Presbyterian Girls School from 1940 to 1946. She decided to take the London Matriculation Examination in 1945.[27] Despite the discouragement of her male colleagues, who said the studies were too difficult for her and did not support her further study, she was accepted into the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1946. With the support of her elder brother and mother, she was able to accept the opportunity. Her elder brother, Christian, made inquiries to the University of London on her behalf, and her mother secured loans for her.

She received her LLB in 1949 and was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn the following year. She also participated in religious and social work during her free time in London. She worked with youth camps organized by the YWCA and was elected to the executive committee of the World YWCA during her final years as

25. Konrad Raiser, "Tribute to Justice Annie Jiagge," Worldwide Faith News, 7 August 1996, https://archive.wfn.org/1996/08/msg00073.html.

26. Achimota School, *Achimota School History*, https://oldachimotan.org/history/.

27. Halperin and Halperin, "It's Wonderful to Be a Woman."

a student.[28] Later she became a pioneer in Ghana's YWCA and vice-president of the World YWCA. In 1947 she attended the Oslo World Conference of Christian Youth. It was here that she formally came into the ecumenical movement. She had already been prepared for this in her family, faith, and academic upbringing. But she then returned to Ghana. She became the first woman to be a lawyer, a judge, an appeals court judge, and supreme court judge on the bench in Ghana.

Whether she was engaged in ecumenical, legal, scholarly, or diplomatic affairs, she brought a fierce passion for justice. She was devoted to sacred public service driven by her faith and acute intellectual legal mind. She especially engaged in these matters relative to women, girls, and racism. United Nations Secretary-General Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, at her memorial 3 August 1996, said of his "close colleague and friend":

> Known internationally for her scholarship, her energy, her patience and a life devoted to public service, Mrs Jiagge will long be remembered at the United Nations for the significant role she played in advancing the rights, status and role of women over a period of three decades from 1962–1996.[29]

She was selected in 1962 to serve on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, given her stature as a leading member of the bar in Ghana. In 1966 she was their rapporteur and in 1968 their president. She was also on the advisory group that planned the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995.

At the same time, she was able to align these abilities and wisdom with the ecumenical agenda. She attended the WCC assemblies in 1954, 1968, 1975, 1983, and 1991. Additionally, she served on several WCC committees concerned with the laity and the WCC Commission on Inter-Church Aid Refugee and World Service. She served as the first African woman president of the WCC, elected at the WCC's 5th Assembly in 1975 to 1983 (6th Assembly in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada).

At the 5th Assembly in 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya, she gave a timely keynote address on "Women in a Changing World."[30] This was a highly visible moment in which her understanding of the alignment of her United Nations works and the ecumenical agenda came together. In the address, she points to the "staggering evidence on deprivation and degradation of all kinds suffered by women all over the

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28. Mansah Prah, "Jiagge, Annie (1918–1996)," in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia.,* ed Anne Commire, 10–28 (Waterford: Yorkin Publications, 2016).

29. "Tribute by the United Nations Secretary-General, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, on the occasion of the memorial for Mrs Justice Annie Ruth Jiagge, 3 August 1996," United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/news/jiagge.htm.

30. David M. Paton, *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches,* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), 22. https://archive.org/details/wcca17/mode/2up.

world on account of their sex." Her address describes a series of discriminatory and inhumane violations targeted at women. But she skilfully points to directions of hope when she states, "A turning point in history has been reached and a necessary correction must be made in the process of deliberation on all issues concerning humanity." She cites education as an important value: "The more highly educated and the more highly skilled women we have on the labour market, the greater will be the increase in production for the benefit of those living today."[31]

But it was also her pioneering role as the moderator of the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) from 1984 to 1990 that showed the courage and boldness of her Christian leadership, which built on the race relations work and ten WCC-related ecumenical statements on race relations from 1937 to 1964[32] and subsequent statements until the beginning of her tenure as moderator of PCR.

The year 1984 was an especially volatile time for movements, groups, and the churches in South Africa. Anti-apartheid fervour was high, as were the crushing assaults of apartheid. Rev. Prof. Dr Konrad Raiser referred to this in his WCC tribute to Justice Jiagge: "In those days . . . (South Africa's) security agents had no qualms about crushing opponents of apartheid. . . . In the given circumstances, it was a bold stance for an African woman to take."[33]

Dr Brigalia Ntombemhlophe Bam—public theologian and civic ecumenical leader

> *Religion has always been a part of my life, a part of me. I cannot point to any moment of my life and say that I had a revelation. My faith has always been there. (Brigalia Bam)*[34]

> *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8-9)*

The encounter

I first heard about Dr Brigalia Ntombemhlophe Bam at the 7th WCC Assembly in Canberra when she gave Part II of the women's pre-assembly report and served as a panellist on "Churches in Solidarity with Women." Since that first glimpse, I have been blessed and privileged to learn first-hand and through my research, interviews with her, and conversations with those who know her about who she

31. WCC 5th Assembly, November 28, 1975, Annie R. Jiagge, Plenary Presentation on "Women in a Changing World," 20.

32. *Ecumenical Statements on Race Relations.*

33. Raiser, "Tribute to Justice Annie Jiagge."

34. Elinor Sisulu and Brigalia Bam, "Born into the Church," *Agenda 25, Women and Religion* (1995), 2–25.

was and is today. The following is an opportunity to introduce or re-introduce some of what I have learned about her.

Dr Bam, like many of the women in this book, had a long history of contact with churches, missionaries, and mission schools. Her grandfather baptized her, and her mother was the church organist. She was a regular churchgoer with her family and enjoyed this. Although she wasn't sure what they were praying about, she still enjoyed watching people pray. While she refers to these experiences in an interview with Ms Elinor Sisulu in 1995, she also states, when asked about her earliest memories of being a religious woman, "The first time I became conscious of speaking as a Christian woman was when I was in the World Council of Churches (WCC), and I spoke out against sexism in the church."[35]

But the evidence of her vocational journey and reflections suggests an important nuance that appears to be true not only of her but also of all the women in this book. She did not make distinctions about aspects of her life, being religious or not. In the same interview, she states she does not isolate her political involvement, activism, feminist beliefs, and religious beliefs. "All these aspects of my identity have a bearing on what I do, and I find it difficult to isolate any one of them. I would say that my religious beliefs are the foundation on which my identity is built."[36]

The leadership role of Dr Bam

Dr Bam, a laywoman—which is the case for most women in this book—understood and still understands her vocation not only as foundational to her religious belief but also as an expression of this. Indeed, only two of the women in this book were ordained, although all of them fought or are also fighting for this place for women in the churches. She found a home in the Anglican Church of South Africa.

Dr Bam was the editor and co-convener of the *What Is Ordination Coming To? Report of a Consultation on the Ordination of Women, Held in Cartigny, Geneva, Switzerland, 21–26 September 1970*. It was hosted by the WCC Department on Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family, and Society. At the time, she was serving as the associate secretary of this department. The report sought to recognize the increase of women being ordained. At the same time the report sought to recognize the contributions of women who were not ordained. Both groups of women were experiencing growth in the churches. In conclusion, the report stated, "We believe the Church must be surely aware of the need to use for mission all gifts at her disposal, for the building up of the people of God and the

35. Sisulu and Bam, "Born into the Church."

36. Sisulu and Bam, "Born into the Church."

service of the world."[37]

An important place of Dr Bam's leadership was with the YWCA. Early in her work, she served as the youth programme director of the YWCA in South Africa. In this role, she spent time in rural areas working with women's groups. These were places where women and their children were often left alone while their husbands and sons worked in the mines far from them.

During her time at the WCC, she was executive programme secretary for the Women's Department, where she worked on women's issues and did anti-racism work with the PCR. In this role, she also joined Dr Mercy Oduyoye in the founding of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She also mentions in the project report that she found it gratifying to work on a project with the European Women's Ecumenical Council. She founded this work as well, bringing together women from East and West in Europe. Here, the ecumenical movement became increasingly aware that Europe was deeply divided not only ideologically but also linguistically and ethnically. She was honoured on the 10th anniversary of the organization for her leadership in pulling these groups together.

Although I witnessed her leadership at the WCC's 7th Assembly, I did not meet with her then. I first met Dr Bam during her tenure as secretary general of the South African Council of Churches. She served in this role from 1988 to 1997. The season of her leadership ran from the height of the anti-apartheid struggle to the major transition from this to free and fair elections in 1994 when President Nelson Mandela was elected and inaugurated. I witnessed her leadership when I was in South Africa participating in ecumenical meetings against apartheid at that time. The South African Council of Churches was a leader in this advocacy work. At that time, Rev. Frank Chikane was its general secretary.

I was intrigued by the idea and presence of a strong woman of faith like her who was part of the leadership team. I sought to learn more about her and other South African ecumenical women. Later, as a member of the WCC central committee which met in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1994, where she spoke to us, I discovered that Dr Bam had an important legacy with the WCC as well.

In 1999, President Mandela asked Dr Bam to be the chairperson of South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). She had already served as the deputy chairperson under Judge Johann Kriegler, but he had resigned, and she was serving as interim chairperson. With the resignation of Judge Johann Kriegler, Bam was thrust centre stage by President Nelson Mandela, just months before the second democratic elections in 1999. In her book *Democracy: More Than Just Elections,* she shares the following remembrance about this:

37. What Is Ordination Coming To? Report of a Consultation on the Ordination of Women, Held in Cartigny, Geneva, Switzerland, 21–26 September 1970, ed. Brigalia Bam, (Geneva: WCC, 1971). Reprinted with permission on https://womenpriests.org/ecumenism/women-what-is-ordination-coming-to/.

> In a typical deep Madiba voice, he said, "Hello Hlophe. This is Nelson. You remember I asked you to act as Chairperson of the IEC when [Judge] Johann Kriegler resigned? I just want you to know that in 15 minutes, I will be announcing to the nation that I have appointed you Chairperson of IEC of South Africa," he said before he hung up.[38]

She spent 12 years at the helm of the organization.

What I witnessed at the time of my encounter with her leadership was only a glimpse of much more I learned in my journey to know pan-African women of faith in the global ecumenical journey.

Dr Marie Bassili Assaad—advocate for the care and divinity of marginalized communities

> *How can I deal with family planning or literacy or the girls in Moqattam and all this, and let this girl be cut up?" (Marie Bassili Assaad)*[39]

> *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Cor. 6:19)*

Bishop Moussa, bishop of youth of the Coptic Orthodox Church, spoke of Dr Marie Bassili Assaad in a tribute. He said that Dr Assaad was an "icon of love" and touched upon her diverse roles as a mentor in public life, within the church, and through the deep personal bonds she forged with people of all denominations. "She transcended the boundaries of rich and poor, educated and illiterate, Christian and Muslim."[40]

Dr Assaad was a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church. She was born in 1922 in the Cairene district of Faggala in Egypt, the fourth girl in a family whose traditional preferences were for male children. At a young age, her mother introduced her to volunteering with the YWCA. As a schoolgirl at the Cairo American College for Girls, she volunteered to tend to disadvantaged families suffering from tuberculosis and give literacy instruction to their children. In 1947, she represented the movement at the 2nd World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo.

In 1953 she was appointed as the first Egyptian woman to serve in the World YWCA in Geneva. She served for 16 months as a programme assistant in the

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38. Brigalia Bam, *Democracy: More Than Just Elections* (KMM Review Publishing Company, 2016).

39. Phoebe Farag Mikhail, "Knitting Together the Community of Love: Lessons from Marie Bassili Assaad and Mother Irene," *Faithfully Magazine,* 10 January 2022, https://faithfullymagazine.com/marie-bassilli-assaad-mother-irene/.

40. "Tribute to Marie Bassili Assaad," WCC website, 2018, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/tribute-to-marie-bassili-assaad.

Youth Department. From there, she became secretary general of the Egyptian YWCA. She was a delegate to the WCC's assembly in Nairobi in 1975, where she became a member of the working committee of the WCC's Department on Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family, and Society.

In 1965, Dr Assaad joined the American University in Cairo's Social Research Center. During this time, she focused her anthropological research on population studies. She was an environmentalist and engaged the Egyptian community with her environmental priorities. In so doing, she was an advocate for recycling before this became popular.

She was also an advocate to end female circumcision. Partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia is practised in around 40 countries, mainly in West and East Africa, as well as in some Arab areas. In 1970, Dr Assaad published a seminal study on female genital mutilation in Egypt as well as the rest of Africa. The study was the first of its kind to cover such a wide range. She shed light on the social and cultural factors perpetuating female circumcision, and not just the physical act alone.[41] It became the basis of work for the committee preparing for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Her study not only described the factors but also shared the horrors of the practice girls experienced in case studies. Dr Assaad probed the motivational objectives of female genital mutilation, as well as the expectations and engagement of the carrying out of this practice by both males and females. Her report was courageous and ground-breaking.

In 1987, she, along with two other writers, wrote a report entitled "Empowering the Next Generation: Girls of the Maqattam Garbage Settlement." Maqattam is a settlement in Egypt of 17,000 people where livelihoods are directly or indirectly linked to garbage collection and sorting. Girls and women make all the usual traditional female contributions to family life and are also in charge of most of the family's tasks after garbage collection. Begun in 1987, the first livelihood project established for girls—rug-weaving—has two related objectives: adding to girls' economic skills and personal income and finding a way to release them from the confines of their households.

The report shows evidence of her being not only a deeply spiritual woman but also one who appreciated the scientific and public health evidence of the consequences of the practice. She played a key role in establishing the Coptic Church's Bishopric for Social and Ecumenical Services.

It was her pioneering work on female circumcision that eventually led to her title of "Egypt's gentle warrior," in an article reprinted as recently as 11 March 2021.[42] In the end, she was credited for giving "impetus to combating the

41. Marie Bassili Assaad, "Female Circumcision in Egypt: Social Implications, Current Research, and Prospects for Change," *Studies in Family Planning* 11:1 (1980), 3–16.

42. Aziza Sami, "Marie Assaad—Egypt's Gentle Warrior," Ahramonline, Thursday, 11 March 2021, https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/198001.aspx.

prevalent practice in Egypt of female circumcision, also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)." In so doing, she had a unique ability to cross boundaries. This included bringing both Muslim and Christian clerics to the table. She was known for "allowing and never imposing, she listens, encouraging others to speak out, and calling the variations in opinion 'collective wisdom.'[43]

In 1980, she was chosen as WCC's deputy general secretary, making her the first woman and non-clerical figure to be appointed to the executive levels of the organization. During her six years of work in Geneva, Dr Assaad was the staff moderator of Unit III of the Department of Women and Men in Church and Society and an active member of the Christian Medical Commission. Dr Assaad placed women's issues firmly on the council's agenda during her tenure: "She was also instrumental in planning, executing, publishing, and presenting a two-year study on female sexuality and bodily functions in different religious traditions in time for the UN Decade on Women. This publication was made available for the WCC assembly in Canberra."[44]

43. Mikhail, "Knitting Together the Community of Love."

44. World Council of Churches, Tribute to Marie Bassili Assaad, 12 September 2018, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/tribute-to-marie-bassili-assaad.

Chapter Four

1975–83: The First Generation of Pan-African Women Faith Leaders Transitions to the Second Generation of Leaders

Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot—"Legend of Our Times" (*Essence* magazine, 1990)

> *Justice is the other face of love, love in action, but our love as Christians must go beyond palliative. It must be revolutionary. (Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot)*[1]
>
> *I am an island woman, a small island woman, at that, but I claim to be a citizen of the world. (Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot)*[2]
>
> *And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (2 Cor. 9:8)*

The encounter

I first met Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot at a WCC executive committee meeting in Atlanta in the United States in 1988. She was serving as the vice-moderator of the WCC and, therefore, had an important leadership role. It was an awe-inspiring meeting. My national church leadership was well represented, and several Historic Black Church leaders were present. The Rev. Dr Allan Boesak, the anti-apartheid faith freedom fighter, gave an inspiring message while we were there. I had been invited by both my national church leadership and WCC-USA Executive Director Rev. Joan Brown Campbell.

As a very young ecumenical woman of African descent in the USA leading a local or state council of churches, I was honoured to be invited to participate in such a gathering with my national church as well as at such a national-global ecumenical gathering. I was also invited to be a part of the creation of what became the WCC-NCC Black Church Liaison Committee. This became a very active space for representatives of the Historic Black Churches in the USA to

1. Sylvia Ross Talbot, *Finding My Voice, (*Nashville, Tennessee: AMEC Sunday School Union/ Publishing House, 2004), 44.

2. Ross Talbot, Finding My Voice, xxv.

convene and strategize on their voice and presence in the ecumenical movement. Such work eventually led to the first WCC president of African descent in the WCC, Bishop Vinton Anderson, who was responsible for ecumenical affairs for the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The leadership journey of Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot

Like Rev. Dr Rena Karefa-Smart and Dr Mary O. Ross, Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot was affiliated with a Historic Black Church denomination in the USA with a pan-African lens. Her relationship was with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This church includes churches in the US territory of St Croix, Virgin Islands, and globally. Today, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has membership in 20 episcopal districts in 39 countries on five continents.

Dr Dennis Dickerson, former historian for the African Methodist Church, shares the following about the church:

> The AMEC (African Methodist Episcopal Church) grew out of the Free African Society (FAS) which Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. When officials at St. George's MEC pulled blacks off their knees while praying, FAS members discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African-Americans. Hence, these members of St. George's made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation.[3]

But Dr Ross Talbot's church journey did not begin with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She grew up with the ecumenical streams of being Lutheran, Moravian and Anglican/Episcopalian, thanks to her family. Sadly, her father died just before she graduated from high school. Still, she was undeterred. She had planned to go to college in the USA but ended up at the Polytechnic Institute in San Germán, Puerto Rico, which became the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico the year she graduated. There, she took the opportunity to learn Spanish.

She graduated with an undergraduate degree in biology in 1955. She, like Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart, followed this by graduating from Yale University, where she met her future husband, the late Bishop Frederick Hilborn Talbot from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who was Guyanese. He was attending Yale University Divinity School. She received a master of science in public health from Yale in 1957, years after Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart received her master's degree in 1945.

After her studies at Yale, she and her husband moved to British Guyana during the dialogue on independence and national elections that were being scheduled. There, her husband became an African Methodist Episcopal pastor, and she

3. Dennis C. Dickerson, "African Methodist Episcopal Church About Our History," African Methodist Episcopal Church website, https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/.

became a schoolteacher at a girls' high school. But before the end of their first year there, she was asked to become a health education officer with the Ministry of Health. As a pastor's wife, she also used her musical talent on the organ, among other abilities. She also became involved in the World Day of Prayer and YWCA activities.

After this she went to Columbia University in New York City, and in 1969 she received her doctoral degree in health education from the Teacher's College. While there, she encountered Church Women United and wrote the resolution for the International Committee for the World Day of Prayer.

Her doctoral work at Teachers College at Columbia University was considered pioneering in her time. She, like Dr Assaad, had a concern for women's bodies, mental health, and spiritual health. She had a particular concern for the reproductive health of young pan-African women. Her doctoral thesis was entitled "An Inquiry into the Knowledge of Selected Aspects of Conception and Contraception of a Group of Unmarried, Pregnant Negro Girls Sixteen Years of Age and Under." "The study was designed to discover what unmarried, pregnant Negro girls of school age know about conception and contraception; the sources of their information; whether they use this information; and in what ways they would prefer to get additional information."[4] She returned to Guyana, became the government's Minister of Health, and implemented a ground-breaking national health plan. She also became president, among 27 ministers of health representing their countries, of the Pan American Health Organization.

This was when she met Nita Barrow from Barbados, who came to work in her health ministry as a PAHO (Pan American Health Organization) nursing consultant. Nita Barrow became a mentor and lifelong friend. They would later, in 1973, be invited to serve together in the Christian Medical Commission, with Nita Barrow as director and Dr Ross Talbot as moderator. Also in 1973, she was invited to give the keynote speech at the inaugural assembly of the Caribbean Conference of Churches after working in ten Caribbean countries alongside her husband in previous years.

Not long after this, in 1975, at the 5th Assembly of the WCC in Nairobi, Dr Ross Talbot was invited to serve as moderator of a panel at a very important moment in the global ecumenical movement. From several accounts, including the Official Report of the 5th Assembly, this was a watershed moment for a renewed interpretation of women describing and interpreting women's situation in the world. The theme of the plenary was "Women in a changing world." In this role, Dr Ross Talbot greeted the assembly in Swahili and then briefly described the consultation in June 1974 in Berlin on "Sexism in the 70s" in which 160 women from 49 countries had explored together their experience of discrimination in

4. Sylvia F. Ross Talbot, "An Inquiry into the Knowledge of Selected Aspects of Conception and Contraception of a Group of Unmarried, Pregnant Girls Sixteen Years of Age and Under," Columbia University, 1969, 1.

society and church and their longing to share their alienation and to experience the promise of a new humanity in Christ.

One of the speakers was Ms Dorothy McMahon, a teacher active in the Australian Council of Churches and the Methodist Church, the Australian Labor Party, and Mothers and Others for Peace. She examined her identity, asking whether she was defined by her relationships, by what she did, by other people's ideas of what a woman is like, by class, race, and national background, and sorrowfully confessed: "I have not been able to find in the Church enough ways to share the pain and confusion of that struggle, nor enough celebration to express the hope I feel as I go through the resurrection process of finding myself."[5]

Ms Teny Simonian also spoke. She was an Armenian social scientist on the staff of the Near East Council of Churches, where she analyzed the struggle for women's rights in its social context. She described a vision of social change and how it might impact our institutions and the agrarian lifestyles given the roles of women in family institutions.

Dr Julia Ojiambo, MP of Kenya, spoke as a woman who operates in a man's world as a politician. She is a nutritionist who is now assistant minister of Housing and Social Services. Down to earth and pragmatic, denying that there was anything special about being both politician and homemaker, she also described the influence of social change.

A panel followed in which three other women spoke less personally and more analytically. Ms Prakai Nontawassee, principal of the Thailand Theological Seminary and former WCC central committee member, spoke of the role of the church in a culture where the traditional position of women is summed up in the proverb, "Men are the front legs of the elephant and women are the back legs."

Dr Justice Annie R. Jiagge, a member of the Supreme Court of Appeal in Ghana since 1969 and for some years a leading member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, spoke at length about disabilities of women, challenges with employment, marriage law, and property law, among other things. But she also engaged hope in such advocacy. She then moved on to demonstrate the connection between the status of women and the problems of development and over-population.

At the WCC 6th Assembly held in Vancouver in 1983, Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot was elected as WCC vice-moderator. She was the first woman of African descent from the USA to be elected to this role. She presided over many sessions of the WCC central committee in this role and was a part of the WCC leadership team with the moderator and general secretary. She was a WCC leadership official who greeted country leaders and other diplomats and dignitaries who visited the WCC. This included the official visit of Pope John Paul II in 1984, the year after

5. David M. Paton, *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975. The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), WCC Digital Archive, 20, https://archive.org/details/wcca17/page/n13/mode/2up.

the WCC assembly in 1983.

Dr Dame Ruth Nita Barrow—Caribbean prophet and emissary of life for all

> *But the will to take the next ten steps remains. And you are not alone. You are surrounded by the witnesses from your own past . . . as long as there is injustice, racial prejudice, poverty and unnecessary suffering in the world, there can be no acceptance of things as they are. (Dr Dame Ruth Nita Barrow)*[6]
>
> *But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt. 6:33)*

The encounter

My encounter with Dr Dame Ruth Nita Barrow came in 1991. This was shared in the introduction of the book, but this encounter was only a glimpse of much more that is discussed here.

Dr Barrow is one of the most senior of the women in this book. She was born in 1916 in Barbados during a time when there was an emerging outcry from people of African descent to push for independence from Britain. Barbados, like most countries in Africa and other Caribbean nations at this time, was living under colonial rule. This period followed the legacy of enslavement of Africans and people of African descent who worked on the sugar plantations of white estates in Barbados. Although slavery had come to an end when Dr Barrow was born, the country was still dependent on sugar primarily sold to England, and the price for it was still determined by the British.

It was during this period of Dr Barrow's upbringing and thereafter that she not only witnessed unrest in Barbados but in other parts of the British West Indies. This was also a period when educated people of African descent had few opportunities, even though most of the population was of African descent. Men also had more employment opportunities than women.

Although Dr Barrow shared this ancestry and difficult context of African peoples, Dr Barrow's family resisted the imperialism of colonialism in Barbados. Her older brother, Errol Barrow, became one of the founders of the opposition party that led the independence movement. They both followed family members who were faith leaders, organizers of labour rights and educated and skilled in their trades. Her father was an Anglican priest who died while she was still young. Her mother was also a strong leader who worked in the USA to provide for her family while her uncle served as a primary care provider for her in Barbados, where she went to school.

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6. Francis 'Woodie' Blackman, *Dame Nita: Caribbean Woman, World Citizen* (Kingston 6, Jamaica; Ian Randle Publishers Limited), 151.

With her family's support, Dr Barrow completed her education as a student nurse at the Barbados General Hospital in 1935 and her secondary school education by 1934 at St Michael's School. She then trained as a nurse, midwife, and health care administrator. After completing basic training in nursing, Dame Barrow undertook further study at the School of Nursing of the University of Toronto in Canada.

But it was during her travels to Canada through the USA in the 1940s, during the war years, that Dr Barrow's emerging leadership encountered first-hand the racism that people of African descent had experienced in the USA. Up until this time, most of her time had been in a majority context of people of African descent under colonial rule. When Dr Barrow had to fly through Haiti to get to Canada, she was delayed in Haiti for a few days, and instead of being taken to New York for her connecting flight, she was flown to Miami, Florida, which is part of the "deep south" in the USA. It was here that she had challenges finding accommodation during her layover because of racism. She, like other people of African descent in the USA at that time, was not permitted to stay in most places. But it was also here an alternative housing location was arranged for her by people of African descent, a normalized approach and response for people of African descent in the USA.

Still, she returned and carried on her vocational roles in Barbados, Trinidad, where she took up midwifery, and Jamaica in the 1940s and 1950s. After this, she served as nursing advisor of the Pan American Health Organization a regional office of the World Health Organization. In this role, she advised 13 governments in the Commonwealth Caribbean on nursing, nursing education programmes, and programmes specifically related to community health.

Despite her earlier challenges, she continued to pursue her academic and vocational dreams and received the support of a Rockefeller Fellowship. She continued her training with specialist study at the Royal College of Nursing of Edinburgh University in 1951–52 and at Columbia University in 1962–63. Her period of service as an instructor at the West Indies School of Public Health in Jamaica in 1945–50 was quickly followed by appointments in nursing and public health in Barbados and other places in the Caribbean. This included serving as the first West Indian matron of the University College Hospital in 1954 and the first principal nursing officer of Jamaica in 1956.

From 1964, Dr Barrow's service to the West Indies region was expanded when she became the director of a research project in nursing in the Commonwealth Caribbean. This project resulted in the reorganization and upgrading of nurses training in the region and subsequently led to the introduction of Advanced Studies in Nursing at the University of the West Indies.

All her experiences of challenge and vocational opportunities of pioneering leadership in Barbados, Jamaica and North America would critically inform her future ecumenical, global, and political leadership.

In 1975, she became the director of the Christian Medical Commission of the

WCC,[7] at around the same time as becoming the president of the World YWCA in 1975–1983. She was made a Dame of St. Andrew (DA) of the Order of Barbados in 1980, the highest honour in Barbados.[8] This happened during the period when Barbados' parliamentary democracy was modelled on the Westminster system and constitutional monarchy that related to England from 1966 to 2021. She received the title of Dame from the Queen of England. She was also awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Nursing.

She was also active in the 1985 Nairobi Conference that marked the end of the UN Decade for Women and was later named her country's ambassador to the UN. The *Church Times* in 1996 described her as "a powerful, but at the same time warm-hearted presence. She was acclaimed as a "prime representative of a new generation of self-confident and articulate Christian women."[9]

She became WCC president 1983 and served in this position until 1991. This period overlapped with her serving as the first female governor-general of Barbados from 1990–1995. Her pioneering female leadership role was of global historical significance, following her other global achievements and family legacy of leadership.

Dr Mary Olivia Brookins Ross—global women's auxiliary leader and church matriarch

> *From Crumbs to Gravy: From the crumbs of commitment to Jesus Christ, to the gravy of God's unlimited grace and boundless love."*[10]*(Mary Olivia Brookins)*
>
> *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)*

The encounter

I first encountered the awe-inspiring presence and leadership of Dr Mary O. Ross at my first national meeting of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. I had been engaged with the convention growing up in Cedarville, Clifton and Springfield, Ohio, at Zion Baptist Church and later St John Missionary Baptist Church, where my father pastored. However, I had only been to district and state convention meetings while growing up. Although my parents had attended state conventions more regularly than I did as a child and had been to national sessions,

7. The (WCC) Christian Medical Commission is primarily a resource of the Christian churches. It attempts to assist in clarifying the churches' role in their stewardship for the health of all people and determining priorities, which it then exercises in the name of our Lord.

8. Esther Jones, *Government Information Service. (*Government of Barbados, 2020).

9. *Church Times,* 12 January 1996.

10. Mary Olivia Brookins and Olivia Davene Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy: The Autobiography of Mary Olivia Brookings Ross* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1989).

my opportunity to go to a national session did not come until my mid-20s while serving as executive director of the Trenton Ecumenical Area Ministry (TEAM), which was the council of churches in the Capitol area of New Jersey in the USA.

There she was! A towering presence, in command, with grace and authority in our Women's Auxiliary meeting during our mid-winter board meeting in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her presence seemed intimidating to me, as I watched her on the stage championing the agenda with hundreds of women of African descent in the grand room of the meeting. But upon meeting her, I found her to be not only strong but also very kind and deferential, having a gentle smile.

Dr Ross's journey from her ancestors

The leadership of Dr Ross was nurtured by her family in Dawson, Georgia—considered the "deep South" of the USA. She was the granddaughter of enslaved ancestry. She makes mention of this in her autobiography, *From Crumbs to Gravy*. She said it was a painful topic seldom discussed, but she also said, "I can now look at the lives these 'ole' folk lived as 'freedmen' and see the strong characteristic attributes that were genealogically given me."[11]

She lived in the house with her father's father, Isom Brookins. He was born into slavery in 1845 (20 years before the Congressional Emancipation Proclamation in the USA). His mother, also formerly enslaved, lived nearby. She was born in 1815. Dr Ross remembers her as a "feisty little lady . . . and as being very old and deeply spiritual."[12] It is important to note here that the 1870 Census was the first Census in which formerly enslaved African peoples in the USA appeared as full citizens with surnames identified with their owners. In this case, her grandfather was using another last name from the one she knew.

Another of her ancestors she knew from the enslavement period was her maternal great-grandmother. She was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1835. By the time Dr Ross knew her, she had lost her eyesight. Despite this, Dr Ross describes her as a remarkable woman who lived in a shack by herself and refused to move in with her daughter, Olivia, Dr Ross's namesake, until her son-in-law died. She makes mention of her ancestors who were married "slavery style." During enslavement, enslaved people of African descent could not legally marry. "Jumping the Broom" was one of the rituals used to indicate the solemn vows of a couple.[13] Although Dr Ross does not explicitly state this was the "slavery style" used, it was a common practice at that time. In Dr Ross' accounts of her ancestry in her book, she further states that her maternal great-grandmother was forced to breed enslaved children who were sold away from her. This, too, was a common way of life for women of African descent during the enslavement period of over

11. Brookins and Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy,* 16.

12. Brookins and Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy,* 19.

13. Ariana Labarrie,"The History and Meaning of Jumping the Broom," *Brides*, 3 January 2022, https://www.brides.com/jumping-the-broom-5071336.

250 years in the Americas.

Amid this brutal season of maltreatment of African peoples, Dr Ross also cites a love story between a white Irish man and her grandmother, Olivia, who married! He and the rest of Dr Ross's family were, according to Dr Ross, not accepted for this. I would say they were ostracized! He lost his farm and died a pauper, and it was the family he married into that saved him from a pauper's funeral.

Dr Ross's parents, unlike her ancestors, had the benefit of education. Both her parents were teachers at the Douglas Academy in Shellman, Georgia. They ran a home with very strict discipline. They taught her that all work is honourable. This included renting land and farming it as well as working for other people in their fields and orchards, often picking cotton, which was valued more than the other crops. During this period, sharecropping was the dominant way of life for people of African descent. Some called it enslavement by another name. Structural racism was deeply entrenched during this colonial era, and Dr Ross lived this. She shares various stories about this in her book.

After graduating from the eighth grade, with her parent's tutelage, she went to school at a church-related boarding school called Americus Institute. She was refused admittance on her first application to the Spelman Seminary, which, in the 1920s, was the prominent school for young women like her. In her book, *Righteous Discontent*, Dr Elizabeth Higginbotham describes the early church life of institutions like this and what became the women's auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. In the early 1880s, Black churches in Atlanta, Georgia, and Richmond, Virginia, pledged money for women's education. It is important to note here that white sympathetic Northern Baptists funded only some educational opportunities for the men. But the Historic Black Baptist Church, the Friendship Baptist Church, turned over its basement to Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles of the New England–based Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society. It became the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary and was later renamed Spelman after Laura Spelman Rockefeller, wife of John D. Rockefeller, in 1884. Together, they gave major gifts to the school.[14]

By 1885, the school had 250 boarding students for the women's seminary for women of African descent. Unlike other limited schools, they did not focus as much on industrial training as on strong religious instruction. Dr Higginbotham explains that at the time, Ms Packard and Ms Giles pushed for a rejection of what they called "heathenism" in both Black Atlanta and Africa by seeking to rid Black worship emotionalism and to promote "refined manners."[15]

In 1920, Dr Ross was admitted, on her second attempt, to Spelman Seminary after graduating from high school. By this time, the school had become an ideal destination for young women like her who had been educated until eighth grade

14. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 32.

15. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 34.

or who graduated from high school. In 1924, while Dr Ross was a student, the dream of the school having a chapel was realized when the famous "Sisters Chapel" was built. Dr Ross shares, "I was thrilled beyond belief to be the first class to use this beautiful chapel for baccalaureate and commencement services."[16] Sixty-one years later, she was asked to deliver the chapel's 60th anniversary message.[17] Laura Spelman Rockefeller and her sister, Lucy Maria Spelman, made it possible for the chapel to be built.

During this same period, another movement was maturing with the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. This was the formation of the Women's Convention Auxiliary to the convention in 1900, following the founding of the convention in 1880.[18] There were specific streams of women's movements within the convention and before the convention. This took place in a dynamic context of migratory patterns of people of African descent, primarily from the southern to the northern areas of the USA. The woman's suffragist movement, urbanization, and industrialization were also happening. Contrary to what may have been assumed, these women saw themselves as missionaries to save America despite their own social location.

During this contested season concerning race relations in the USA and especially segregation among the races, the issue of gender segregation, equality and equity was also contested within and outside of communities of African descent in the USA. Therefore, the question of a Women's Convention being formed was also hotly contested. This debate was centred on the question of whether there was "a need for a separate Women's convention within the life of the Convention." In the end, a separate, related Women's Convention was established, and the first president was Dr Sarah Willie Layten, the daughter of Rev. William H. and Mary H. Phillip and a graduate of LeMoyne College in Tennessee. She was also an honorary member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and an active member of the Woman's National Republican Committee. This committee was associated with President Abraham Lincoln, who signed the executive legislation of the Emancipation Proclamation that freed enslaved people of African descent.[19] Dr Nannie Helen Burroughs was the second president of the Women's Convention, but she first served as corresponding secretary to the Women's Convention for over 40 years. She was a strong, independent thought leader, of whom it was said:

> Where she led, people followed. By 1920 she was well on her way in leading the Women's Convention to organize themselves as a labor union of domestic workers named the National Association of Wage Earners

16. Brookins and Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy,* 37.

17. Brookins and Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy.* 33.

18. "History of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.," National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc website, https://www.nationalbaptist.com/about-nbc/our-history.

19. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 157–58.

> which recommended "radical changes" for these workers and livelihoods. The agenda had a nine-point plan and had set up alignments with people like Booker T. Washington at the renowned Tuskegee Institute, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other groups of that time.[20]

Dr Mary Olivia Ross followed her pioneering leadership years later, after graduating from Spelman, serving under Dr Nannie Helen Burroughs for many years and meeting and marrying Rev. S. D. Ross.

In 1953 Dr Ross met Rev. Dr Jesse J. McNeil, a renowned Christian educator, minister, and leader. The Rev. Dr Jesse Jai McNeil had answered the call to Tabernacle Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. He was an educated and scholarly man. He was also very active at the international level, participating in several major Christian conferences on youth and education. He had received his BS, MA, and EdD degrees from Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary, and he served as the director of publications of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. Before coming to Tabernacle, he was also pastor to churches in New York City and Nashville, Tennessee, and served as dean of the School of Religion at Bishop College, Marshall Texas.[21]

Dr McNeil noticed the work of Dr Ross and invited her and other outstanding people to accompany him on a goodwill tour to five countries in Western Europe. The invitation was extended by Dr W. A. Visser't Hooft, who was general secretary of the WCC. Dr Ross writes the following about this:

> Dr Ross and the group experienced the rare opportunity to confer with and speak to the people who populated these countries, but all seem to embrace and proclaim One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. The group was enthusiastically received in Copenhagen, Denmark; Berlin, Germany; Paris, France; London, England; and Geneva, Switzerland. This trip, which would never be forgotten, was designated as a Christian Outreach and was Mrs Ross's "steppingstone" to national and international meetings throughout the United States and the world.[22]

After this, in 1954, she was a delegate to the 2nd Assembly of the WCC in Evanston, Illinois. She was also a delegate to the Golden Jubilee Session of the Baptist World Alliance in London, England. After Dr Burroughs' passing in 1961, Dr Ross became the president of the Women's Convention Auxiliary. She was surprised to be selected and then elected, although she had exhibited pioneering leadership in her district, state, and while serving under Dr Burroughs' leadership

20. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 150–84.

21. "History of Tabernacle Baptist Church," Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, https://tmbcdetroit.org/images/History-of-Tabernacle.pdf.

22. Brookins and Ross McKinney, *From Crumbs to Gravy,* 7.

at the national church level. Her international engagements also commended her, as did other missional endeavours nationally and globally.

Dr Ross maintained the independence of the Women's Convention Auxiliary and followed the pioneering role of leadership of her predecessors for her time. After becoming the president, she also continued as a delegate at the WCC assemblies until 1991. She became a member of the central committee in 1983–91. It was my honour to follow her and our general secretary, the Rev. Dr W. Franklyn Richardson, from my convention in 1991, where I was elected to the central committee.

Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk—guide and usher to the second generation

> *"I define justice as the love of God made visible in our hearts and then in our world. It is a relational concept, and it is a systems concept." (Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk)*[23]

> *"But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God." (Hos. 12:6)*

The encounter

I first met Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk when I was in heartfelt pursuit of achieving my dream to go to the Motherland of Africa. I was a senior at YDS and had been accepted as a volunteer to serve in the Darfur region of Sudan through Operation Crossroads Africa. The challenge would be to raise the money to be able to complete this service.

Operation Crossroads Africa was the forerunner of the Peace Corps. President John F. Kennedy modelled the Peace Corps after Operation Crossroads Africa. The founder was the Rev. James Robinson, a Presbyterian pastor of African descent who became committed to bridging relationships of young emerging leaders from the USA with young emerging leaders in a growing independent Africa. The mission was and is still grounded with a primary regard for African peoples and communities in their localized contexts of leadership and agency.

People at YDS told me about the Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk. They had heard about her and thought she might consider my fundraising appeal to go serve in Darfur. I pulled together my train fare and made my way to New York City, where she was serving as the leader of the national office of the United Church of Christ's (UCC's) Office of Church and Society. I did not know what to expect from such a meeting, but I found the courage to go forth and give my appeal a try. I had

23. Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk, "Reflections on the Women's Justice Panel from the Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk," The Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, 9 March 2020, https://www.chhsm.org/news/reflections-on-the-womens-justice-panel-from-the-rev-dr-yvonne-delk/.

already been impressed with her willingness to meet with me, although she did not know me.

She was gracious and welcoming. Much to my surprise, however, she had some questions for me. She wanted to know why I wanted to go to Africa so badly. When I told her it had been a lifelong dream, she was delighted. We had further conversations about my dreams for ministry after graduation from YDS and service in Sudan. She was very encouraging to me. Since that time, she has been a mentor, supporter, and sojourner on the ecumenical journey. Her office gave me $350 for my first mutual service of living in traditional communities in Africa, and it was this gift that became my leverage support for others to support me that year. This first experience of living outside of the USA launched two more "Crossroads" service experiences hosted by my country counterparts in Sierra Leone and Lesotho. Since then, I have lived in six African countries and travelled extensively throughout Africa and the world related to ecumenical unity, mission, and justice.

Dr Delk's spiritual roots

Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk was born into the "deep South" of the USA in the state of Virginia. She, like other women in this book, grew up during the colonial period of the violent and racist Jim Crow laws.

> Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African-Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism. Many Christian ministers and theologians taught that white people were the Chosen people, black people were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation.[24]

Dr Delk, like Dr Mary O. Ross, understands and has understood the injuries and harm of these conditions and contributed to the ecumenical movement with this experience in mind:

> The family lived in the city's red-light district because of the racist policy of redlining that kept people of African descent segregated in their housing options. Her father, Marcus Thomas Delk Sr., worked on the maintenance staff at Norfolk State College, although he did additional jobs like woodcutting, and worked as grave digger and shipyard worker, in order to

24. David Pilgrim, "Jim Crow," Jim Crow Museum, accessed 15 October 2023. https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/what.htm.

provide for the family.[25]

Despite these challenges of historic structures and policies that did not favour her and her family, her mother, Cora Elizabeth Chambers Delk, said to her daughter, "No matter where life takes you, Yvonne, remember who you are and whose you are."[26] This was underscored by the influence of her grandmother who was a minister and missionary in the United Holy Church. The United Holy Church of America, Inc., established in 1886, is described as the oldest (Historic) African-American Holiness-Pentecostal body in the world. It is a predominantly black Holiness-Pentecostal Christian denomination, and the International Headquarters is in Greensboro, North Carolina.[27]

Dr Delk speaks of how her parents felt a profound spiritual appreciation and rejoiced at the birth of their miracle daughter, who was their third child born after the loss of the child before her. Dr Delk says this story of healing was a seed that created a foundation for her, fostering her primary lens of spirituality, personally and vocationally.

Dr Delk's spiritual formation began in the home and at her church, Macedonia Christian UCC in Norfolk, Virginia. Dr Delk said the following of the church:

> In a hostile environment, it surrounded my family with love, reminded us that we were created in God's image, instilled in me a deep sense of pride and worth. It equipped me with skills and tools for making a difference. It called me by name and spoke a word over me and through me, reminding me that I belonged to God. When a word has been spoken over you—a word that gives you an identity, meaning and purpose—no one can ever reduce you to namelessness again.[28]

She also had a very important experience at a summer camp at Franklinton Center at Bricks Junior College in Whitakers, North Carolina, sponsored by the Convention of the South, which today is the Southeast Conference of the UCC. This is the regional body of the UCC within the states of Alabama, north-western Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee (except the city of Memphis). This specific regional Conference has an important heritage of missionary efforts, dating back to the reconstruction (postbellum) period (1866–77) in the USA following the legislation of the Emancipation Proclamation of freed people of African descent in 1865. One of these conference churches was

25. "Yvonne V. Delk," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yvonne_V._Delk.

26. Mary Hamlen, "Yvonne V. Delk: A 'Soul on Fire' for Justice." In Colleen Hartung, (ed.). *Claiming Notability for Women Activists in Religion*, (Books@Atla Open Press), 97–122. doi:10.31046/atlaopenpress.40, cited in Yvonne V. Delk," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yvonne_V._Delk.

27. United Holy Church in America, Inc., http://www.uhcainc.org/.

28. Delk, "Reflections on the Women's Justice Panel."

founded as early as 1681.

At least half of the cumulative membership of the UCC district conference of churches are of African descent. This reflects the mission work of the Afro-Christian Convention's American Missionary Association, as well as more recent church planting that has targeted this population. Although a smaller conference in the life of the UCC, it is today seeing growth with its increasing emphasis on peace and justice witness.

The Franklinton Center was located on the grounds of a former college for previously enslaved people of African descent, Brick Junior College, and is the site of a former plantation. Dr Delk speaks of the cotton fields there that held her ancestors in captivity, but also of how the buildings, the freedom paths walked by men, women, and children for an education and new way of life are the same today as they were in the early 1900s. Today it remains a social justice retreat and conference centre.

It was there that Dr Delk deepened her understanding of the history, suffering, and spirituality of African peoples and other peoples and groups. This experience contributed to her focus on Christian education and the struggle for liberation, justice, freedom, mission, and unity. Later, she went back to serve as a counsellor for this programme that benefitted her. Following this, she taught at Black churches while in college and had other mentors who encouraged her to pursue Christian education and these foci vocationally. Dr Delk traces the history of this African-American legacy that nurtured her in her book released in 2023, *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ.*[29]

She graduated with a BA in sociology from the historically Black Norfolk State College in 1961, where she joined the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Virginia and became a young activist. She participated in organizing over 100 sit-ins in segregated businesses in Norfolk, Virginia. In 1960, the city's lunch counters were desegregated.[30]

After graduating from Norfolk State College, she received a full scholarship to study Social Work at Atlanta University. However, she chose to study for a master's degree in religious education at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. Being at a predominantly white institution, especially as one of the few persons of African descent at that time, came with many barriers. But with strong support from her family and church, she persevered.

Her thesis was completed on the subject of "The Inner-City: A Challenge to the Church" in 1963, before the future groundswell of the Civil Rights movement in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s. While she was at the seminary, she also joined the Eastern Shores campaign of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the Cambridge Civil Rights movement. In 1963, she graduated

29. Yvonne Delk, *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 2023).

30. Hamlen, "Yvonne V. Delk."

from the seminary with a master's degree in religious education, and in 1977, she completed a doctor of ministry degree at the New York Theological Seminary.

After graduating from seminary in 1963, she served as a Christian educator at the historic Black congregation with the UCC, First Congregational Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and later as a parish minister at a predominantly white church, the First Reformed Church of the UCC in Cincinnati, Ohio. This was during the time of the Civil Rights movement. Following the martyrdom of the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr and related unrest in Cincinnati, the mayor appointed her to a commission to focus on the economic and racial inequities in Cincinnati.

Dr Delk's ecumenical and global church leadership

The year 1969 was an important one locally, nationally, and globally, following the martyrdom of the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King. This was the year after the WCC assembly in Uppsala, where Rev. Dr King was to have spoken and where important ecumenical transitions were occurring. At the national level in the USA, Dr Delk had left her primary local context and joined the national staff of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. She was the first woman of African descent to hold a national program staff role in the organization. Her national work included being an educator of urban and Black church studies as well as promoting ecumenism and pan-African approaches. This work eventually led her to become part of Black ecumenical movements within and outside of the UCC, one of only a few women to do so.

A significant pan-African ecumenical event occurred during this time: the Black Manifesto. Dr Delk joined Rev. Dr James Forman to support this in 1969, along with other church leaders who were primarily people of African descent.[31] The Black Manifesto demanded that white churches and synagogues pay reparations for Black enslavement and continuing discrimination and oppression.[32] The Black Manifesto demanded $500 million for reparations.[33]

Dr Delk's activism drew the attention of other church leaders. The year following, in 1970, she travelled to Africa and visited countries in both West and East Africa. This journey contributed to her deepening focus on Black liberation and anti-apartheid activism from a faith perspective. This includes her work with Justice Annie Jiagge and the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of the WCC, where she succeeded her as chair and later chaired the WCC's convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. She served from 1985 to 1996 as

31. "Jim Forman Delivers Black Manifesto at Riverside Church," Digital SNCC Gateway, May 1969, https://snccdigital.org/events/jim-forman-delivers-black-manifesto-at-riverside-church/.

32. Riverside Church, *The Black Manifesto at The Riverside Church,* https://www.trcnyc.org/blackmanifesto/#guide.

33. Elaine Allen Lechtreck. "'We Are Demanding $500 Million for Reparations': The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development," Journal of African-American History 97:1-2 (2012), 39–71.

the UCC-appointed representative to the PCR of the WCC, where she was a member of its executive group. She also provided leadership with the PCR Women Under Racism working group. She worked with a committee of 25 persons from all regions of the globe and visited five continents to build alliances between movement groups and churches on issues of racial justice and the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

In 1988, she also wrote the "Call to Ecumenical Celebration of Hope" at the WCC International Consultation on Racism and Racial Justice held in the USA. It was the first time in 20 years that the WCC returned to the USA. The visit included advocacy to commute the federal prison sentence of David Sohappy Sr, his son, and two other members of the Yakima Indian Nation, who were convinced that the sentences were grossly disproportionate to any alleged wrongdoing.

Both timely leadership tasks at the WCC in the global ecumenical community still affect WCC priorities. She also served on the board of the Black Theology Project. Here, she worked with people like Cornel West to advance the voice of women in the ecumenical Christian project. She presented the findings of Children in Poverty to the US House of Representatives as chair of the related National Planning Committee in 1988.

Like Rev. Dr Rena Karefa-Smart, Dr Delk was not ordained in ministry until later. On 17 November 1974, she was ordained in the UCC national church denomination. She was one of two women in this study of pan-African women of faith to be ordained, and the first woman of African descent ordained in the UCC. This did not normally happen for most of the period of 1939–83 in most churches. Indeed, prior to 1974, for example, neither of the two women in this book who became ordained by their churches were positioned to become senior pastors or heads of denominations or confessional bodies. At the same time, Rev. Dr Delk, unlike Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart, became a pastoral leader during her younger years in ministry.

Dr Karefa-Smart emerged later in her ministry as a pastoral leader. Further, she became a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church based in the USA, which is an ordained denominational district church leader role. She was also affiliated with the Episcopal Church in the USA, later in her ministry.

But Dr Delk's ordination was a struggle in the larger narrative of the churches and in her own church. Her ordination came a few months after the WCC consultation in June 1974 in Berlin on "Sexism in the '70s," where 160 women from 49 countries had explored together their experience of discrimination in society and the churches. While her ordination was not directly related to it, this consultation included the subject of ordination. This had also been the case in prior global ecumenical meetings, including the 1975 assembly, where Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot moderated the assembly session on this topic before she became WCC vice-moderator in 1983.

In Dr Delk's case, in addition to the struggles against racism and sexism, she also struggled because the ordination process required a call from a local congregation.

Because she was providing national ministry service, she had few opportunities to establish local relationships. However a creative solution was found among several Black churches in Virginia, who collaborated to advocate for her ordination. Her ordination service was completed at Fellowship UCC in Chesapeake, Virginia.

In 1981, she became the leader of the UCC's Office of Church and Society. She became the first woman of African descent to lead a national department for the UCC. In 1989, Dr Delk became the first woman nominated to lead the UCC as General Minister and President; she lost the election to the Rev. Dr Paul Sherry.

It would not be until 2023 that the first woman would serve in this role: Rev. Dr Karen Georgia Thompson, a WCC Executive Committee member, a woman of African descent and pan-African heritage from the Caribbean and the USA, was nominated and elected to this post.

Dr Delk moved to Chicago to lead the Community Renewal Society. A mission arm of the UCC, she worked with them to address poverty, racism, ecumenism, and homelessness. She was also active with the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education and founded the Center for African-American Theological Education. She has mentored other women leaders and became an advocate for their church leadership in and outside her church.

With the UCC, this has included the African-American Women in Ministry (AAWMUCC) network and conference, which she co-founded with Rev. Dr Bernice Powell Jackson, the first woman of African descent to become WCC President from North America. AAWMUCC is a support system for UCC women who are in all phases, stages, and places in ministry—ordained, commissioned, in discernment, and licensed in ministry settings within the UCC and throughout other denominations.

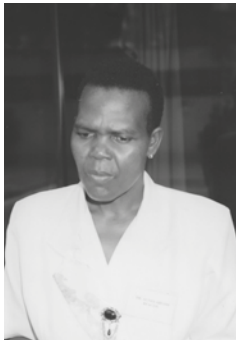
Dr Delk's season of leadership is also a gateway to the second generation of pan-African women of faith beyond 1983. The timing of the transitional period of her rising at the younger end of the lineage of the women in this book uniquely foreshadows what was yet to come in this second generation, including more ordained women. While there are women in this book whose contributions go beyond 1983, she is also one of only three women in this book who are still with us and the youngest. She knew several of the women in this book and was mentored by a few of them as well. She was also a mentor to me in the second generation. But here again, in this second generation, it is important to say that, with or without ordination in either the first or second generation, all the women in this book were ecumenical and church pioneers "ahead of their time."

Chapter Five







1983–2022: A New Generation of Pan-African Women of Faith and Changing Ecumenical Trends

In the mid-70s, we started to see an increase of pan-African women of faith leadership in the ecumenical movement and, thereby, in church history. This chapter explores the general themes of the ecumenical assemblies and some key faith movements or moments of pan-African women in and between these assemblies.

The WCC assemblies of 1983, 1988, 2006, 2013, and, most recently, 2022 have built upon the formative periods of the earlier assemblies. By 1983, a new generation was arriving, and the past leadership and foundation had been formed to bring forward a renewed Christian vision of unity, justice, and mission with a second generation of leaders and a changing context.

6th Assembly of the WCC, Vancouver, Canada, 1983

In 1983, for the first time, neither of the first two general secretaries was able to be at a WCC assembly. The assembly in Vancouver, Canada, held from 24 July to 10 August 1983, was championed by the Rev. Dr Philip Potter, who was serving as WCC general secretary. The theme was "Jesus Christ—the life of the world," with 301 member churches attending. The assembly report states:

> At this assembly on the western shores of Canada, a renewed emphasis on common worship was experienced under the great white tent standing beneath the summer sun. Hope for closer fellowship arose from dialogue on the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) document, and such ecumenical experiments as the Lima Liturgy. At the same time, the nuclear threat and neo-colonialism glowered like dark clouds on the horizon. The Assembly proclaimed its theme: "Jesus Christ—the Life of the World," and carried out its work in the following issue groups: Witnessing in a divided world; Taking steps towards unity; Moving towards participation; Healing and sharing life in community; Confronting threats to peace and survival; Struggling for justice and human dignity; Learning in community;

and Communicating credibly.[1]

More than 4,500 people a day, on average, found themselves taking part one way or another in the assembly:

> 30.46% were women (Nairobi had 22%; Uppsala 9%), 13.46% were under 30 years of age (Nairobi 9%; Uppsala 4% under 35) and 46.3% were lay people (Nairobi 42%; Uppsala 25%). Only about 20% had been to a WCC Assembly before (Nairobi had the same high proportion of new blood to old). The regional breakdown was North America (158), Western Europe (152), Eastern Europe (142), Africa (131), Asia (114), Middle East (53), Latin America (30), Caribbean (19), Australia, New Zealand (26) and the Pacific (22).[2]

Late 1980s and early 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s brought a second generation of pan-African women of faith leaders who were positioned to build on the first generation's foundational work. Indeed, it was women like Rev. Dr Rena Karefa Smart, Dr Mercy Oduyoye and Dr Brigalia Bam, Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk and the Honourable Justice Annie Jiagge who contributed to strategic spaces for the second generation to build a renewed, sustainable legacy going forward. Here are two very important examples of these spaces.

WCC Programme to Combat Racism, Women Under Racism sub-programme, and its SISTERS Network

Although the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) was started in 1969 in response to the 4th Assembly in Uppsala in 1968, women subjected to racism were not a primary focus. This, despite the increased number of women at the Assembly. This, despite the growing independence movement of African nations and the Civil Rights movement in the USA, where women were playing critically important leadership roles as discussed in this book and other places. Despite the voices for an equitable place in ecumenical community that were already rendered with the first generation of pan-African women and others, it would not be until the 1980s that this programme would find its way to focus on women.

In her article, "Black Women's Transnational Activism and the World Council of Churches," Pamela Ohene-Nyako cites the Women Under Racism programme and the related Sisters' Network that was founded in the 1980s and early 1990s

1. "6th Assembly, Vancouver 1983, Past WCC Assemblies," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies.

2. *Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches,* Vancouver, Canada, 24 July–10 August 1983 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 7, WCC Digital Archive, https://archive.org/details/wcca20.

under the leadership of Dr Jean Sindab, Ms Marilia Schuller, and a working group in which Rev. Yonne Delk was a part of the programme executive committee of the PCR.[3] These two movements would be key to bridging the first generation and second generation of pan-African women and the ushering in of a third generation of leadership that would come later. Dr Ohene-Nyako's commendable work is an important record of this timely initiative and the many women associated with it.

1989: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) was born in 1989 with Dr Mercy Oduyoye's leadership in partnership with Dr Brigalia Bam, who was there along with other African women theologians and what was called the International Planning Committee. The WCC accompanied the birth of this African-centred initiative. Dr Oduyoye and Dr Bam both served in program and executive administrative leadership at the WCC before and after the founding of the Circle. Both affirmed the vision and theological centre of pan-African women in Africa and the African diaspora. At that time, the WCC Community of Men and Women was led by Dr Bam and the Youth programmatic office was led by Dr Oduyoye. Together they provided resources and partnership with African women theologians who had already begun to envision and create what became the Africa-based Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the book about the history of this movement, the author, Dr Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, tells us "there were other movements addressing the issue of gender inequalities in church and society before the Circle was born."[4] While WCC-related theologians like Professor Dr Letty Russell at Yale Divinity School and others were in early discussions with Dr Oduyoye and others, it is important to point out that African women had already begun their own biblical theological work in their own contexts. The first generation of pan-African women leaders are examples of this. The leadership that launched the Circle was in one way or the other in touch with earlier voices concerned with women's liberation. Dr NyaGondwe Fiedler reminds us of the following: "Circle theologies are distinct from other women's liberation movements in that they are theologies formed in the context of African culture and religion."[5] Because the Circle was born in Africa and envisioned by and for African women and African Diaspora women, Circle theologies are also called either African feminist theologies or "African women's theologies. . . . They are distinct from other feminist theologies developed elsewhere, but also belong to a wider family of feminist theology, which can be

3. Pamela Ohene-Nyako, "Black Women's Transnational Activism and the World Council of Churches," *Open Cultural Studies 3:1 (2019),* 219–31.

4. Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007* (Mzuni Press: Malawi, 2017), 10.

5. Fiedler, *A History of the Circle*, 10.

further categorized as one of the liberation theologies."[6] Dr NyaGondwe Fiedler's commendable work is an important contribution about the Circle and the many African and African Diaspora women and theological contributions associated with this important movement in the past and today.

1985–92: A new general secretary—Rev. Dr Emilio Castro

Not long after the 1983 assembly, a new general secretary was elected: Rev. Dr Emilio Castro, from Uruguay. He was the first general secretary from Latin America and served from 1985 to 1992. He was a pastor and theologian. The Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC's general secretary from January 2010 to March 2020, said, "His personal leadership was crucial for the production of *Missions and Evangelism—An Ecumenical Affirmation*, considered the most important and comprehensive statement on mission by the World Council of Churches, adopted in 1982 after lengthy discussions with churches all over the world."[7] The Rev. Dr Walter Altmann, the WCC's central committee moderator, wrote, "Castro was one of the most outstanding ecumenical leaders in Latin America. An eloquent preacher, he could convincingly link the call to mission to social commitment."[8] In his tribute, Rev. Carlos A. Valle, who served as World Association for Christian Communication general secretary from 1986 to 2001, wrote:

> Emilio Castro was a pastor who carried out multiple ministries characterized by a marked concern for communication. . . . He was a renowned speaker who sought to express the Gospel in terms that would reach ordinary people everywhere throughout the world. His extensive work in the World Council of Churches (WCC) took him from the director of its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1973 to Secretary General from 1985 to 1992.[9]

The encounter

One of my professors at YDS was Prof. Dr Letty Russell. I took a course on liberation theology from her during my senior year. Prof. Dr Russell was a strong advocate for women's concerns and perspectives of liberation theology. She was also very involved with the WCC. One day she shared that the general secretary of the WCC would be visiting the USA and one of his stops would include speaking at Harvard Divinity School. She spoke very highly of him and how he was going to bring new life and energy to the global faith community.

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6. Fiedler, *A History of the Circle*, 10.

7. "Leading Ecumenist the Rev. Dr Emilio Castro Dies in Uruguay," World Association for Christian Communication, 9 April 2013, https://waccglobal.org/leading-ecumenist-the-rev-dr-emilio-castro-dies-in-uruguay/.

8. "Leading Ecumenist the Rev. Dr Emilio Castro Dies."

9. "Leading Ecumenist the Rev. Dr Emilio Castro Dies."

Up until taking her class, I had only heard slight murmurings about the WCC. The WCC was not familiar to me. I did not grow up knowing the ecumenical movement, the WCC, or the National Council of Churches. I had heard of interdenominational ministers' groups, but the other names were not part of my awareness. Prof. Dr Russell changed this for me. Her energy for the WCC was strong, and she thought having her students meet Dr Castro would be meaningful.

Prof. Dr Russell assisted me in getting on the train to hear Dr Castro at Harvard Divinity School. I can still remember the passion, charisma, and knowledge in his presentation to divinity school students. I had the opportunity to ask him what the role of a pastor has to do with his leadership as the general secretary at the WCC. He was open and shared how he saw himself as a pastor even in his role as general secretary. This response, within a fuller discussion, impressed me, and I remembered this when, years later, I met him again in Canberra, Australia, along with WCC President Dame Ruth Nita Barrow.

7th Assembly of the WCC, Canberra, Australia, 1991

As was noted in the outset of the book, this was my first assembly. I was elected to the WCC central committee at this assembly as well, and later to the executive committee of the Commission of Sharing and Service of WCC representing North America. This unit oversaw the diaconal work of WCC and, during my tenure, the development of what has become the ACT Alliance. The assembly was held from 7–20 February 1991. The theme was "Come, Holy Spirit—renew the whole creation." There were 317 member churches present: "1991 was the first time a theme had explicitly invoked the third person of the Trinity, and it did so in the context of the physical universe. Sections were organized under four sub-themes: 'Giver of life—sustain your creation!'; 'Spirit of truth—set us free!'; 'Spirit of unity—reconcile your people!'; 'Holy Spirit—transform and sanctify us!'"[10]

Dame Ruth Nita Barrow was the president from the Caribbean and Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot was a vice-moderator of the central committee. They were presiders during the 1991 assembly. The new WCC presidents elected included Eunice Santana, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister who directed the National Ecumenical Movement of Puerto Rico; Dr Anne-Marie Aagaard, a Lutheran theologian from Denmark; Bishop Leslie Boseto, a bishop in the United Church from the Solomon Islands; Ms. Priyanka Mendis, an Anglican with the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka; Patriarch Parthenios III of Alexandria, Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Africa, from Egypt; Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria, patriarch of the Coptic Church (Egypt); and Rev. Dr Aaron Tolen, a Reformed educator from Cameroon. At least five of the presidents had an African lineage. In the specific case of Bishop Vinton Anderson, an African Methodist Episcopal Bishop, he became the first person of African descent and

10. "7th Assembly, Canberra 1991," Past WCC Assemblies, WCC website, https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies.

from a Historic Black Church in North America to become a WCC president.

In a *Washington Post* article, Bishop Anderson said he wanted to promote Black ecumenism, which is aligned with pan-African perspectives.[11] When he spoke at the assembly before his election, he also underscored the imperative of complementing declarations of independence and democratic constitutions with a continuing struggle for the freedom and equality of all members of the human family, created as they are in the image of God.[12] He stated that he was honoured to be a part of the WCC-NCC Black Church Liaison Committee before becoming WCC president and the Committee continued to support him actively.

1992–2003: A new WCC general secretary—Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser

Rev. Dr Raiser was born in Magdeburg, Germany, in 1938, during the same period as the pan-African women of faith featured in this book. He served as deputy general secretary of the WCC when Rev. Dr Philip Potter was general secretary. He left this post in 1983 and began teaching at the Bochum University in Germany. In August 1992, the WCC central committee elected Rev. Dr Raiser as general secretary for a five-year term. He assumed his responsibilities in January 1993, and in September 1996 was re-elected for a second five-year term, which ran until the end of 2002. Given the probable changes to be recommended by the Special Commission, and other items, the central committee, meeting in Potsdam in 2001, extended his term by one year to December 2003.

He brought both an academic and praxis-oriented leadership, having served in a steel mill in a programme organized by his church, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), finished pastoral training in 1965, and starting his work at the WCC first in the department for Faith and Order. His studies included studying theology in Tübingen, the theological school in Bethel, and later going to the universities of Heidelberg and Zürich. He was ordained in 1964.

1996: Salvador, Brazil, "Called to One Hope: The Gospel in Diverse Cultures"

The WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism conference held 24 November–3 December 1996 in Salvador, Brazil was a very significant moment in pan-African life in the ecumenical movement and outside of it. Norman E. Thomas recalls the power of being in a place where the profound history of horror of enslavement exists and where the largest concentrated national population of African peoples still resides outside of Nigeria.

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11. Pamela Schaeffer, "New WCC President Wants to Stress Black Ecumenism," *Washington Post*, 9 March 1991, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1991/03/09/new-wcc-president-wants-to-stress-black-ecumenism/00c3086d-fae4-4e5d-8f8a-010d0a4f4d3b/.

12. *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), WCC Digital Archive, https://archive.org/details/wcca23.

> A time-worn orange brick brought tears to the eyes of 600 Christians from more than 80 nations attending the World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Salvador, Brazil, in November 1996. The gray sea foamed against the dock at Solar do Unhao as it had for over 300 years during which 6 to 12 million African men and women had arrived in Salvador to begin a life of slavery. In silence men and women made their way to a small church behind the dock where water had been thrown on the slaves as a collective baptism.[13]

It was a major moment of preparing for the 1998 assembly in Africa once again, where a special coming together of pan-African peoples in the ecumenical movement would happen.

8th Assembly of the WCC, Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998—Under the African Cross

Dr Agnes Abuom was elected WCC president from Africa at this assembly. She already had an ecumenical lineage that she shared at the beginning of the book. I was also a delegate to this assembly and elected again to the WCC central committee. This assembly was held under the African cross in Harare, Zimbabwe, 3–14 December 1998. The theme was "Turn to God—rejoice in hope." There were 336 member churches present.[14]

"Half a century after the official foundation of the WCC, its member churches renewed their commitment to stay together, and delegates promised to remain in solidarity with their African hosts."[15] The message of the assembly focused on the setting, being under the African cross, and the growth of African churches independent of their colonial church legacies. Keynote speakers included people like President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, who spoke about the positive and negatives of the churches in Zimbabwe's history; and Dr Barney Pityana, former programme executive from the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). On 8 December, in the session "The African Context," Dr Mercy Amba Oduyoye presented "From Cover to Core: A Letter to My Ancestors." [16]

The assembly decided to set up a commission on the participation of the Orthodox churches in the WCC. It backed

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13. Norman E. Thomas, "Salvador 1996: 'Called to One Hope: The Gospel in Diverse Cultures,'" *Missiology: An International Review* 25:2 (1997): 189–97.

14. *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches,* 3–14 December 1998, Harare, Zimbabwe, (WCC Publications, 1999), 6, WCC Digital Archive: https://archive.org/details/wcca25.

15. *Together on the Way.*

16. Mercy Amba Oduyoya, "From Cover to Core: A Letter to My Ancestors" in *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches,* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999). 213–223.

> the creation of a "Forum of Christian Churches and Ecumenical Organizations" which could extend the ecumenical outreach far beyond WCC member churches. . . . Delegates and assembly visitors participated in more than 600 contributions to a three-day "Padare" in which subjects ranged from Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue to human sexuality. It was preceded by a Decade Festival of churches in solidarity with women and the main plenary focused on the Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women.[17]

The Harare assembly was the largest in WCC history. It included 966 voting delegates chosen by the 336 member churches to represent them: 367 women, 599 men, 525 of whom were ordained, 438 who were lay. Included in these numbers were 134 youth. They came from the regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and the Pacific. The largest number of delegates was from Africa and Europe, followed in number by Asia and North America. Twenty-nine associate member churches (those churches otherwise eligible for membership but with fewer than the required 25,000 members) sent 31 representatives who had the right to speak but not to vote.[18]

During the assembly, a historic gathering of pan-African participants, regardless of category of participation, met in the assembly hall. Rev. Dr Sam Kobia, serving as a programme executive director of WCC, had approached me with the idea of convening such a meeting. He, a pan-Africanist from Kenya, expressed his interest in doing this, given we were gathered in Africa. He proposed that the name of the meeting be in honour of WCC President Aaron Tolen (1991–98) and Rev. Dr Mac Charles Jones, who was the moderator for the Urban Rural Mission of the WCC, central committee member, member of the WCC-NCC Black Church Liaison Committee, and former deputy general secretary of the NCC in the USA.

The following year, by the time of the first central committee after the assembly, it was called Mac-AAD, to acknowledge the ecumenical legacies of both these leaders. It was an exciting pan-African moment for all gathered, and it led to ongoing pan-African meetings of the central committee and assemblies going forward. It is now called Africans and Africans in Diaspora (AAD). Sadly, however, Rev. Dr Aaron Tolen passed away in 1999, and Rev. Dr Mac Charles Jones had already passed away in 1996.

Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, WCC general secretary at the 1998 assembly and in 1999, said the following about Rev. Dr Aaron Tolen:

> Aaron was God's precious gift to the ecumenical movement in general and

17. "8th Assembly, Harare 1998," Past WCC Assemblies, World Council of Churches, accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies.

18. Kessler, *Together on the Way*, 6.

to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in particular. His distinguished service and contribution to the life and well-being of the ecumenical movement spans a whole generation. For thirty years he dedicated his life and abilities to promoting the unity of the church and of humankind. He generously put his professional skills and gifts at the disposal of the ecumenical movement.[19]

This included Africa and globally.

2004–09: A new general secretary—Rev. Dr Sam Kobia

Rev. Dr Kobia was the first general secretary from Africa (Kenya). He was elected in 2003. After his election he called the churches to

> work tirelessly towards the healing of the world, and the restoration of the human dignity of all the people of God . . . if you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to go far, walk together with others. My prayer is that in this ecumenical movement we shall go very far, walking together, strengthening each other to fulfill the prayer of our Lord—that all may be one—to the glory of the Triune God.[20]

He studied at St Paul's School of Theology in Kenya and at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in a rural home in Meru, an eastern province of Kenya, where he completed primary and secondary education under the British colonial system. He marks the first general secretary whose date of birth (1947) falls after the period of the birth of the women in this study (1939).

In addition to these theological studies, he pursued studies on urbanization and its impact on African cities at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he graduated with a master's degree in city planning in 1978. His thesis paper was titled "Origins of Squatting and Community Organization in Nairobi." He received a doctorate from Christian Theological Seminary, was a fellow at Harvard Divinity School, and served in various WCC executive staff leadership roles. Prior to this he served as general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK).

9th Assembly of the WCC, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006

The WCC's 9th Assembly took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14–23 February 2006. The theme was "God in your grace, transform the world." There were 348 member churches present. This assembly was considered:

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19. "Tribute to Aaron Tolen," Worldwide Faith News Archives (1999), https://archive.wfn.org/1999/04/msg00086.html.

20. Sam Kobia, *Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003).

> one of the most representative gatherings of Christians ever held—with over 4,000 participants from ecumenical organizations and groups, delegates from 348 member churches, observers and visitors from all around the world. Addressing the core issues of Christian unity, the Assembly agreed on a new text, "Called to be the One Church," and urged that WCC and its member churches give priority to the questions of unity, catholicity, baptism and prayer. Other key issues discussed at plenary sessions were Economic justice, Christian identity and religious plurality, and Youth overcoming violence. Also, delegates adopted a substantially revised Constitution and Rules which moved the WCC to decision-making based on consensus and which amended membership criteria. Steps were taken to strengthen the active involvement of youth (under 30 years) in the life and work of the Council.[21]

One of the speakers covering major issues was the future WCC deputy general secretary, Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, who spoke about "Claiming a common future: A Protestant voice." Olara Otunnu spoke on the theme of "God's children from the scourge of war." Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town and Nobel laureate, also spoke. I met him at the All Africa Conference of Churches with Mrs Tutu. He and his wife had become mentors and friends since that time. The Rev. Dr Bernice Powell Jackson—who was the future WCC President from North America, the first woman of African descent in this role and former leader of the Desmond Tutu Fund—and I were honoured to meet with them during the assembly. We briefed each other on contemporary matters for ecumenical support.

The report of the assembly describes the plenary on 21 February as follows:

> The final thematic plenary, on February 21, was devoted to the theme of the assembly, "God, in your grace, transform the world." Although the speakers had prepared papers that were distributed, the session took the form of a television talk show in which I, as moderator and representative of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., interviewed a group of panellists. Gracia Violeta Ross Quiroga, representative of the National Network of Bolivian People Living with HIV and AIDS, spoke of suffering sexual abuse and being infected with HIV, but also of the strength she has found in God's grace and love. Sarah Newland Martin, of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, who represented Jamaica in the Pan-American Games from 1972 to 1982 and in the 1980 Paralympics, described her life as fully transformed by baptism through the grace of God. Carmen Lansdowne, an Indigenous person and member of the

21. "9th Assembly, Porto Alegre 2006," Past WCC Assemblies, WCC website, https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#past-wcc-assemblies.

United Church of Canada, noted how autochthonous peoples have suffered, not only at the hands of the state but also at the hands of the church.[22]

Rev. Dr Robina Marie Winbush, former director of the Department of Ecumenical and Agency Relationships of the Presbyterian Church (USA), gave the closing sermon at the assembly in Brazil on 23 February 2006. It was a powerful message that echoes today. She preached on the theme of "For the healing of the nations based on Revelation 22:1–5." She was elected to the central committee at the assembly and later to the WCC executive committee at the next assembly. She passed away suddenly on 12 Mar 2019. She provided important and celebrated leadership until the time of her untimely departure.

2009–19: A new general secretary—Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

Prior to Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit serving as general secretary of the WCC, he was general secretary of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations (2002–09). He was ordained in this church and served on the board of directors and executive committee of the Christian Council of Norway as well as the Jewish Congregation contact group and board of trustees for Norwegian Church Aid. He was elected general secretary of the WCC in August 2009, and was re-elected to a second term in July 2014.[23]

He also served as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC and as a co-chair of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum core group. As general secretary of the WCC, he led the WCC at the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica in 2011 and the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013. Topics such as climate change, peace-making, and refugee resettlement were also addressed during his leadership period.

Tveit received many significant awards for his work, including several honorary doctorates. In 2002, Tveit was awarded a doctorate in theology by the Norwegian School of Theology/Menighetsfakultetet in Oslo for his dissertation on "Mutual Accountability as Ecumenical Attitude." The thesis formed the basis for his book, *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mutual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement* (WCC Publications, 2016). He authored various books, including *Christian Solidarity in the Cross of Christ* (WCC Publications, 2012).

10th Assembly of the WCC, Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013

The 10th Assembly of the WCC was held in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 30 October to 8 November 2013. The theme was "God of life, lead us to justice and

22. *God, in Your Grace . . . : Official Report of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 37. WCC Digital Archives: https://archive.org/details/godinyourgraceof00unse.

23. "Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/node/6214.

peace." There were 345 member churches present. In the message of the WCC 10th Assembly, participants offered this affirmation:

> We share our experience of the search for unity in Korea as a sign of hope in the world. This is not the only land where people live divided, in poverty and richness, happiness and violence, welfare and war. We are not allowed to close our eyes to harsh realities or to rest our hands from God's transforming work. As a fellowship, the World Council of Churches stands in solidarity with the people and the churches in the Korean peninsula, and with all who strive for justice and peace.[24]

Rev. Dr Neville Callam from the Caribbean and the first leader of African descent of the Baptist World Alliance spoke on the theme of unity with the message, "In thanks and hope." The general secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches and former WCC central committee member, Rev. Dr Andre Karamaga, spoke about hope and dignity for Africa. The Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and national Liberian leader, Ms Leymah Gbowee, spoke about peace and reconciliation. Her message highlighted the movement of pan-African women of faith in Liberia that transformed the nation and led to the election of the first elected woman president in Africa, Dr Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

I was honoured to interview Ms Gbowee and others in my role as the host of the daily show that highlighted daily events. I also served as moderator and talk show host of the Madang Justice plenary and as a delegate, and I was elected to the central committee.

Rev. Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa was elected as the WCC president from Africa, and the Rev. Dr Mele'ana Puloka from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga was elected WCC president from the Pacific. Dr Agnes Abuom, from the Anglican Church of Kenya, was elected as the first woman lay leader and moderator from Africa.

It was also at this assembly that PAWEEN (and later the related PAW in 2016) was conceived. It was formed by 2015 in the Ecumenical Theological Education programmatic work of the WCC. By 2016, Bread for the World (USA) joined this movement with a pan-African woman of faith lens that included advocacy as a key method for addressing the theme of justice within the WCC and Bread for the World. Dr Amélé Ekué and I worked together to build the framework for this with a core group of pan-African women of faith from the WCC regions.

2019: A new acting general secretary—Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca became the first from the Orthodox family to serve in

24. *Encountering the God of Life: Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 35, WCC Digital Archive: https://archive.org/details/encounteringthego00unse/page/n3/mode/2up.

the role of WCC general secretary. He led during the very difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic, with moderator Dr Agnes Abuom, the WCC executive committee and central committee, and staff leadership. Many difficult decisions had to be made about keeping the ecumenical ship afloat given the importance of a past culture of in-person engagement. During this time, the WCC experienced the loss of one of its vice-moderators, Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima—this, in the middle of deciding the timeliness of having an in-person meeting of the WCC central committee to elect its new general secretary and preparing for an assembly.

But by the grace of God and the prayerful discernment of all concerned, the WCC persevered, as it had in past tumultuous years. All are grateful for the leadership of all who brought us through this challenging period that yielded the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany in 1922. Father Sauca was uniquely prepared to play his role of acting general secretary "with all authority and responsibility of general secretary to lead the work of the WCC as chief executive officer, including final responsibility for the work of the Council and its staff, and to speak on its behalf."[25]

It was Rev. Prof. Sauca who supported the beginnings and development of the PAWEEN/PAW network starting at the WCC assembly in Busan, South Korea, in 2013 with Dr Amélé Ekué and myself. At that time, he was serving as director of the Bossey Institute and lead staff to the Ecumenical Theological Commission. While his own identity is strongly rooted in Orthodox Christianity as a priest, scholar, and church leader from the Romanian Orthodox Church, his commitment to ecumenical formation has been primary and unyielding. At the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute held in 2018 in Arusha, Tanzania, he said, "In proclaiming and incarnating the Word in the very context [that] the people of our time live in, we prepare and become partners of God's mission in transforming the world."[26]

11th Assembly of the WCC, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022

The WCC gathered close to 4,500 persons from around the world from among its member churches and related networks and groups in Karlsruhe, Germany. pan-African women of faith were lifted in the celebration of the leadership of Dr Agnes Abuom and so many other women from PAWEEN/PAW, the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, the Bossey Institute, WCC staff, and womanist leaders. Those who are from the second generation of pan-African women of faith and the third generation are very much active and moving now.

Sadly, most of the women from the first generation had passed away by the time of the assembly or could not travel to Germany. We are grateful for opportunities

25. "Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca," World Council of Churches, accessed 11 October 2023, https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/acting-general-secretary.

26. "Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca."

like this book to try and keep their memories alive but, more importantly, to codify their leadership more intentionally into our learning. I was one of the newly elected WCC presidents, from North America/Turtle Island. Two other presidents are from the Caribbean/Latin America and Africa. The president from Africa is from the African Indigenous Churches for the first time, and I am the first woman of African descent from the Historic Black Churches in the USA as the president from North America.

A core message adopted by the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, is as follows:

> Amid all our diversity, we have relearned in our assembly that there is a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity to be undertaken together.
>
> - Meeting together in Germany, we learn the cost of war and the possibility of reconciliation.
> - Hearing the word of God together, we recognize our common calling.
> - Listening and talking together, we become closer neighbours.
> - Lamenting together, we open ourselves to each other's pain and suffering.
> - Working together, we consent to common action.
> - Celebrating together, we delight in each other's joys and hopes.
> - Praying together, we discover the richness of our traditions and the pain of our divisions.[27]

2023: A new general secretary—Rev. Dr Jerry Pillay

On 17 June 2022, the WCC central committee elected its ninth general secretary. Rev. Dr Pillay is the second African from the youngest independent African country, as of 1994, South Africa: many in the pan-African and faith community had been fighting for the independence of the country and all the churches. Before this election, Dr Pillay was serving as dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He is a member of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. He was also a former member of the WCC central committee, which is where I met him. He is the fifth generation of Indian descent in Southern Africa.

Dr Pillay is a reformed pastor and a professor of theology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, where he has headed the Department of History and Ecclesiology and was dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion. In 2010,

27. "Message of the 11th Assembly: A Call to Act Together," in *Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: Report of the WCC 11th Assembly* (Geneva: WCC, 2023), 8, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/christs-love-moves-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity-report-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly.

he was elected president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). He received his bachelor of divinity with honours from the University of Durban-Westville in 1986, a master of arts in missiology and church history from the University of Durban-Westville in 1988, and a PhD in church history and New Testament focused on social development from the University of Cape Town (2002).

In his installation message, entitled "Church at the Crossroads," Dr Pillay reflected that the purpose of the church is to proclaim the saving love and grace of Christ to the world. "It does this as it goes out into the world to preach, teach, baptize, and disciple believers," he said. "The church ought to live to fulfil the purpose of God. Yet, Dr Pillay lamented,

> Sometimes the church today seems to forget its real purpose in the world. Instead, we want to go our own way, seeking our own agendas and attempting to satisfy ourselves. We need to stop and ask: What does the Lord want? How can we fulfil God's purpose?"[28]

The church must rise to the challenges and changing times. As Dr Pillay urges, "We need to stand where God stands with the poor, wretched, neglected, and suffering in the world. The question is, as member churches: Where will you stand?"[29]

28. Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, "Church at the Crossroads," Sermon at his installation as ninth WCC general secretary. World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/church-at-the-crossroads-sermon-by-rev-prof-dr-jerry-pillay.

29. Pillay, "Church at the Crossroads."

Chapter Six

Lessons Learned and Going Forward

God loves, sees, and knows you and me: Do you?

This last chapter provides an analysis of what the lives of pan-African women of faith in this book have meant for advancing the vision of Christian unity, justice, and mission. This chapter also seeks to summarize conversions and diversions within this book. Finally, it seeks to recommend some directions forward for the ecumenical movement based on the learnings from these women's leadership.

At the beginning of this book, Dr Abuom stated,

> While the women were "ahead of their time," it is important to state that God works ahead of time, and in both the margins and centres of power. Notably, pan-African women leaders in North America were carrying out their ecumenical calling and mandate during the colonial, reconstruction (immediately following enslavement), and Jim Crow periods: times when courage and wisdom from above were needed. The call for the end of enslavement by another name—structural racism—and the demand for decolonization gained momentum.

The courage of these leaders was grounded in their faith and in those aspects of the ecumenical movement that supported and accompanied their courageous leadership.

These women's contributions show us a key component to pursuing such a courageous ecumenical calling. It is knowing that God's time and mission beckons us to be prepared to be "ahead of our time" with a critique of that which is conforming us to traditional assumptions and conventions. These women's contributions provide parables of what it means to be called to unity, justice, and mission in the life of the churches and the ecumenical movement. They show us that it is knowing by faith that God sees all of us and the creation—despite what others may or may not see—and that we, in turn, seek to reveal this as we know God first individually and also collectively.

In so doing, we find ways to be a part of God's mission in our relationships to God, creation, and humanity. The vision of unity, justice, and mission offers repeated opportunities to invite transformation and *metanoia* (conversion) in our lives now and in the future, as our ancestors did. Such transcends and therefore moves our actions to being signs of holiness through individual and community

relationships. In other words, we are called to be Sankofa people:

> The Sankofa is a translation from the Twi language to English means to return and get it. SAN translates to Return, KO translates to Go, FA translates to Look, Seek and Take. Sankofa embodies the idea of looking back at our past to learn from it and move forward. It encourages us to remember our ancestors and their struggles and triumphs, and to use that knowledge to build a better future. Sankofa reminds us that our history is a part of who we are, and that we cannot move forward without acknowledging and understanding it.[1]

But first we are called to see both the diversions and conversions of persons and peoples. We are called to be like the angel that revealed the eyes of God to Hagar in her profound estrangement from her enslavers and others. It was through the angel that God saw Hagar, an African woman from Egypt, who was enslaved by Sarai and Abram. Hagar went forth from the wilderness where she was found and gave new life to her child and a new nation was born.

> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. . . . Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.". . . Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she [Hagar] ran away from her.. . . The angel of the Lord found her [Hagar]. . . . The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. . . . So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Gen. 16:1–11 summarized)

Pan-African women of faith have been and continue to be both Hagar and the angel who have not only survived but thrived despite the socio-political order of their times. They give and have given living testimony to the God who lights and continues to light their ways despite the gender and racial discrimination they have experienced and do experience.

Our ancestors and descendants today, who are pan-African women of faith of church history and the ecumenical movement, invite you to see, welcome, and sojourn with them in their ancient, historic, and present pilgrimages of resilience, resistance, and resolve. It is a pilgrimage that embraces God first in these women's personal and communal lives as expressions of their faith and African identities.

Structural reforms can create conditions for such transformation. In this

1. "Sankofa Symbol and Meaning," *Ayeeko* Blog, 24 October 2022, https://ayeeko.africa/blogs/blog/sankofa-sankofa-symbol-and-meaning.

moment, WCC has added reconciliation to the vision of unity and justice. In this book, we see a pilgrimage of these women that resisted the structures during and after enslavement and colonialism that are still expressed today. In this book, we see where pan-African women of faith have understood structural and institutional barriers and limitations but still create new tables of courage and hope to reform and transform these structures. The Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk said in her interview with me, "They were always setting the table for others."[2]

It is a pilgrimage with normalized experiences of assaults—including sexual assaults like Hagar experienced—on their humanity and dignity. But all rose above this and led their families, churches, and the ecumenical movement forward. All of us are the beneficiaries of this.

These observations leave us with questions for further probing as we approach the future of the ecumenical movement. Do we see pan-African women of faith and the lessons they bring to our faith communities, scriptures, Bible studies, theological perspectives, narratives of church history and world and nation-state histories/herstories, and gatherings? In sum, are we on a pilgrimage that includes not only the present moment with them but also ancient and historical moments of their contributions to Christendom and the world?

The courage to hope and act

The pan-African daughters, sisters, mothers, nieces, and aunties of faith in this book have demonstrated lessons of ubuntu that begin with seeing God and fully embracing a welcoming God who sees us—even when others have sought or seek to design a life of marginalization and even death for those they do not see; when others only see their limited familiar relationships, protocols, practices, and policies that only benefit them or primarily benefit them.

It takes courage to move beyond this familiarity. The pan-African women of faith in this book benefitted from the privilege of education and strategic relationships that many lacked at that time and even now. But their stories also demonstrate the power of their own agency, resolve, creativity, determination, and courage to move beyond traditional conformities of that time that sought to hinder them. For these women, this was based on a spiritual and theological premise of living by faith, knowing that God saw them and that they saw God in their journeys.

The Rev. Dr Sam Kobia called this "the courage to hope," as in the title of his book *The Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa*. In his book, he states the following:

> While inspired by Tillich's famous title, *The Courage to Be*, I believe that in Africa today hope is the appropriate outcome of human courage. For Tillich, the concept of courage had two sides: ontological and ethical. In

2. Rev. Dr Yvonne Delk, Interview with author in January 2023.

> *The Courage to Hope,* I am suggesting that by daring to hope the African people will affirm themselves their life and their community despite the strong odds, anxieties and conditions which mitigate against this essential self-affirmation.[3]

The women of this book have taught us once again what it means to embody this courage to hope and to be.

Ubuntu: A pan-African woman of faith's ecumenical reframing of unity, justice, and mission

In the lecture I gave for the Washington Theological Consortium when I received the Figel Ecumenism Award in 2022, I proposed a framing of ubuntu to help us to probe and scrutinize what may be considered viable when seeking to move closer to visible unity without obscuring or devaluing the enduring challenges of racial inequity, which was a common theme for unity, justice, and mission in the life and work of the women in this book.[4]

In the lecture, I suggested that such a visible unity will require questioning the limits of conventional approaches of ecumenism. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Mandela, along with other South African leaders, were well known for their advancement of the principles and practices of ubuntu during their sacred and public campaigns for human dignity and rights. Although there are numerous complexities of the ethics of ubuntu that I will not explore here, some elements are particularly helpful in this season in which we find ourselves.

First and foremost, ubuntu justice values repairing relationships. It emphasizes the following elements:

- Deterrence—which can be done socially, physically, economically, or spiritually
- Returning and replacement—which means bringing back what has been stolen, replacing it, or compensating
- Apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation (restoration of *ukama* or relations)—which occurs after meeting the above

Families, and at times entire communities, are involved in the process of justice. Ubuntu education uses the family, community, society, environment, and spirituality as sources of knowledge but also as teaching and learning media.

Describing the philosophy of ubuntu or Batho, authors Metz and Gaie

3. Samuel Kobia, *The Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 3.

4. Angélique Walker-Smith, "The Hope of Pan-African Peoples and the Contradiction of Visible Unity Deferred, Ubuntu, as a Vision for Christian Unity," *Ecumenical Trends* 51:6 (2022): 4–10, https://www.bread.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Ecumenical-Trends-51.6-2022-Angélique-Walker-Smith.pdf.

emphasize that "actions are right roughly insofar as they are a matter of living harmoniously with others or honouring communal relationships."[5] They expand further, explaining that "One's goal should be to become a full person, a real self or a genuine human being," but doing so is not a matter of individual self-actualization but of meaningful constitution in relationships, *ukama*.[6]

Ubuntu is focused on the related connectedness that exists or should exist between people and on the life-giving force that contributes to and helps make possible this connectedness. The concept of ubuntu not only moves us toward the virtues of love and sharing between the diversity of persons and peoples and within creation itself. It advances a truth that we cannot be the "we are" in the ubuntu mantra until we have a full reckoning with the question of *who I am*—personally, collectively, institutionally, historically, and otherwise.

For Christians, then, ubuntu encourages the affirmation, embrace, and even celebration of God the Creator as the ultimate life-giving force, the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ to reorient and rectify our lives, and the Holy Spirit who transcends our ordinary existence and draws us together into relationship. But such theology collapses into triviality if it fails to uplift real people in real time, especially those who have been denied their entitled opportunity in community, as God's creation, to rest what may be their powerful spirituality upon a secure foundation of what is needed materially.

Ubuntu approach to visible unity, justice, and mission

All the women in the book contributed to the vision of visible unity. Each spoke to the pain of disunity, which included racism, gender discrimination, estrangement of Africa and people of African descent from the rest of the global ecumenical fellowship, poverty, and the wealth and health gaps. Issues like these were not necessarily covered in ecumenical agendas of justice or mission. Their contributions spoke to the fundamental faith and order approaches of unity and the redesign of an inclusive koinonia during their time and today. An ubuntu perspective suggests a more integrative approach that can help us move from such specific silos into matrices that begin and end with relationships centred on the celebration of God as the Creator that promote life and spirit.

In the future

Since the WCC assembly in Busan in 2013, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace has invited us to consider the positive, negative, and transformative aspects of the pilgrimage together. Further, the priority lens of the WCC transversals—i.e., strengthening relationships with member churches and ecumenical partners,

5. Thaddeus Metz and Joseph B. R. Gaie, "The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for Research on Morality." *Journal of Moral Education*. 39 (3): (September 2010) 273–290. doi:10.1080/03057240.2010.497609.

6. Metz and Gaie, "The African Ethic of Ubuntu/*Botho*."

spiritual life, youth engagement, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, addressing racism, and building a just community of women and men—help us to navigate indicators of relationship building and thereby ubuntu throughout the life of the WCC.

Such definitions within the pilgrimage help us create evaluative tools for understanding where we are still conforming to unhealthy and healthy conventional approaches, reforming structures, policies, and practices that are transformed not just for a few. These reforms are inclusive and create space for transformation that invites sacred imagination of what is not seen but could be. All of this is done with a design to decolonize our approaches to unity, justice, and mission.

Authors Cialdini and Goldstein state, "Conformity is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms, politics or being like-minded. Norms can be seen as implicit or unwritten yet specific rules, shared by a group of individuals, that guide their actions and their interactions with others."[7] Most of us align with the conformities and conventions of our familiar churches, communities, and other relationships, both personal and collectively.

Conformity or conforming is specific in each community but some uniform expressions exist:

- Identifying and engaging prayerfully with selected biblical and theological narratives/stories that speak to our limited *Sankofa* histories (past, present and future) that have resulted in denominational and confessional expressions linked to our traditions
- Taking community approaches to prayer and worship
- Building up our sacred communities by working together on various ministries within the churches and outside of our churches (for example, auxiliaries, choir practices, youth fellowship, missionary societies)
- Encouraging the appreciation and contributions of universal stories/biblical principles of values passed from one generation to another with or without critique of who was telling the stories

These sacred acts of conformity within our like-minded or common experiences have been and are foundational to our ability to not only survive but also thrive in familiar communities. But many may argue that being in our conformed spaces and places like these is not enough, especially if certain groupings have disproportionately benefitted from privileged and limited resources that contribute to only your individual or communal sense of security or superiority.

Just as in the period of the women in this book, we continue to see a disproportionate number of pan-African people who have not benefitted from

7. Robert B. Cialdini and Noah J. Goldstein, "Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 55:1(2004): 591–621.

such privilege and limited resources. Rather, pan-African communities have experienced what it means to be on the margins of the dominant socio-political and economic culture and systemic order, globally and historically. Still our courageous resolve, resistance, and resilience have helped us to persevere to achieve a conformity within our communities that has provided healing and power to experience life.

But in both cases, there is still an invitation to critique all forms of conformity and to ask, is this enough? Many, if not most, individuals, churches, church-related groups, and other collectives do settle for conformity and conventional charitable responses as our practical mission and ministry response. Most churches have, for example, benevolence offerings, food pantries, feeding programmes, Thanksgiving basket outreaches, or community Christmas dinners, which are all good acts of love for one another. But what about the systemic cause of the needs expressed here?

The women in this book lived and led within the tension of conforming to the conventional expectations and invitation of their homes, families, and churches but still acted as agents of reform and transformation. Each received the values of faith, discipline, and encouragement from their ancestors, but they were not content with only conforming to their communities. They also expressed their love of communities by critiquing them. Most left their original communities in some way, but most also returned or maintained relationships with them. The evidence shows that all of them felt they were accountable to their communities and acted in ways that reflected this, as agents who asked and pursued hard questions of faith that led to catalytic reforms and transformational acts of unity, mission, and justice.

Within the ecumenical movement, they found certain spaces for reforms. This involved taking the risk of asking theological and contextual questions about ancient and historic systemic policies and practical issues that contribute to the causes of disunity, injustice, and need for mission responses. Joanna Innes states that "reform means the improvement or amendment of what is wrong, corrupt, unsatisfactory, etc. The use of the word in this way emerged in the late 18th century and is believed to originate from Christopher Wyvill's Association movement which identified 'Parliamentary Reform' as its primary aim."[8]

Reforms come from the aching of the heart for a new or renewed starting point. They come from being restless and unsatisfied with the familiar approach of not fully addressing needed fundamental change through public redress like policies and practices, formal and informal. For example, they come from the dissatisfaction of providing a meal knowing that the person is wrestling with the systems, powers and principalities, and policies that put them there in the first

8. Joanna Innes, "'Reform' in English Public Life: The Fortunes of a Word," in *Rethinking the Age of Reform,* ed. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, 71–97 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

place.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines transformation as follows: "to change completely the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person improved."[9] Here we are reminded of Romans 12:2, which speaks to the biblical principle of how our individual and collective character is called to be more strongly aligned to the will of God in our lives and for and with others: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The impact of climate change is transforming the world and especially our world food supply and the church's response to world hunger, for example. But we are called to be agents of transformation who can improve these realities beginning with the heart—a heart that seeks and invites a divine love of God and neighbour that drives our mutual commitment to one another to act.

Rev. Dr Karefa-Smart in her doctoral thesis took on the hard question of word and deed when it comes to the sin of racism. She concluded that words are not enough, but that our deeds are also required. The Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) was a call to heartfelt word and deed in the days of most of the women in this book. All of them answered this call in some way, but this was not the only call they answered. They understood the integrative nature of the web of structural engagement. There were leaders who had both the analysis and a vision and mission of praying, contemplating, discerning, speaking, writing, and acting.

Education was another transformative contribution in the lives of the women in this book. Education is a place where legacy meets the moments for reform and transformation for the future. Transformation is where our contemplation, conformity, and reformative acts engage and meet imagination and the future. All the women in this book were directly impacted by this important ingredient of transitioning from one season to another in their callings. They were able to pivot even when it was uncomfortable and allow God to spur their evolutionary leadership that was not static.

This is very important today when we embrace this season of *Sankofa*, where decolonizing our identities and narratives is a way forward. The women in this book were doing this with their legacies during some of the most difficult formative days, when colonizing was being constructed and codified.

In a recent article about this, I wrote the following:

> The priorities in future approaches for dealing with ecumenical theological education should be to decolonize and decentralize epistemology and methodology and to create a theological education that is relevant today and in the future. Such an approach should include a pan-African women's

9. "Transformation," *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/transformation.

> lens of faith within and outside the churches. . . . Such a lens also invites specific perspectives of other intercultural communities that have historically been marginalized or made invisible to the structures, pedagogies, praxis, and practices not only of conventional approaches to ecumenical theological education but of theological education in general. In sum, PAWEEN/PAW invites a mutual ecumenical solidarity that more fully informs a holistic and decolonized approach to leadership formation within and outside of the churches.[10]

The pan-African women of faith in this book have laid a foundation for this in their impressive legacy of contributions to church and community life as faith and community ancestors of all of us. In this moment, we thank God that there is another opportunity to receive the gifts of these pan-African women of faith in this book and beyond. Their presence and contributions were and still are, in many respects, "ahead of their time." The rising up continues. The same is expected of all of us. The lessons we have and can learn from their leadership are timeless.

What will be the evidence of the lessons we have learned to be "ahead of our time" and thereby in time with God's mission? What will you leave behind for the descendants coming behind you? To God be the glory for the faithfulness of our ancestors, their descendants, and the unborn who serve with word and deed.

10. Angélique Walker-Smith. "Decolonizing and Decentralizing Epistemology and Methodology with Pan African Women of Faith: A Reflection on the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network," *Ecumenical Review* 74:3 (2022), 392.


FOUNDING MOTHERS OF THE PAN AFRICAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION
(TANZANIA 1962)
PAWO

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To God be the glory!

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Dr **Mercy Amba Oduyoye**, 1993. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart**, 2nd Assembly, Evanston 1954. Credit: WCC

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Dr Marie Assaad during the National Council of Churches consultation in Geneva, 20-24 October 1986. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

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Dr Sylvia Ross Talbot speaking in the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre during the visit of Pope John Paul II on 12 June 1984. Here with Pope John Paul II and Philip Potter. Credit: WCC

Front Matter

Dedication Pages

The author's mother, the Rev. (Elder) **Geneva Willis Walker**.Credit: Supplied by author

The author's godmother, Dr **Victoria Weah Tallawford.** Credit: Supplied by author

PAWEEN Women meeting in the Networking Zone at the WCC 11th Assembly on 6 September 2022. Credit: Supplied by author

Collage developed from WCC archive photos for the **Pan African Women of Faith** "Third Thursdays Webinar Series on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace." Credit: WCC/Marcelo Schneider

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Dr **Agnes Abuom**, moderator of the World Council of Churches central committee, 2021. Credit: WCC/Ivars Kupcis

Introduction

Dame Dr **Ruth Nita Barrow**, director of Christian Medical Commission, 1980. Credit: John P. Taylor/WCC

WCC president Rev. Dr **Angelique Walker-Smith**, National Baptist

Convention USA, shares from the North American region as the World Council of Churches central committee gathers in Geneva on 21–27 June 2023 for its first full meeting following the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022. Credit: WCC/Albin Hiller

Pre-Assembly Women's meeting Canberra 1991. Credit: Peter Williams/ WCC

Chapter 1

Attendees at the **2nd Pan African Conference**, Brussels, 31 August to 2 September 1921. Credit: Public Domain, Wikimedia

Delegates for the **4th Pan African Congress** in New York 1927. Credit: Public Domain, Wikimedia

Third Pan-African Congresses in Lisbon, May 1923. Credit: Public Domain, Wikimedia

Chapter 2

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart**, 2nd Assembly, Evanston, 1954. Credit: WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart**, 2nd Assembly, Evanston, 1954. Credit: WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart** talking in a crowd of women at the 2nd Assembly, Evanston. Credit: WCC

Dr **Mercy Amba Oduyoye**, 1996. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart** at the central committee meeting in New Haven in 1957. Credit: WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart**, central committee, New Haven 1957, with Dr Keith Bridston, Bishop Henry Knox Sherill, Bishop Otto Dibelius, Dr Leslie Cooke. Credit: WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart** and her husband, John Smart, at the 1st Assembly in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1948. Credit: WCC

Dr **Mercy Amba Oduyoye** at the WCC 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden,1968. Credit: WCC

Dr **Mercy Amba Oduyoye**, central committee meeting in Geneva, 1972. Credit: WCC

Chapter 3

Dr **Brigalia Bam**, WCC photo, 1972. Credit: WCC

President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson meet with organizers of the **March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom** in the Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C. Left to right: Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz; Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, Mathew Ahmann; President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr Martin Luther King, Jr; representative

for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), John Lewis; President of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Joachim Prinz; President of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC), Reverend Eugene Carson Blake; President of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), A. Philip Randolph; President Kennedy; Vice President Johnson; President of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Walter P. Reuther; President of the National Urban League, Whitney M. Young, Jr; National Chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Floyd McKissick. Credit: Public Domain, JFK Library

Dr **Marie Assaad**, 6th Assembly, Vancouver, Canada, 1983. Credit: WCC

Civil Rights **March on Washington**, D.C. Leaders marching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. In the front row, from left are: Whitney M. Young, Jr, Executive Director of the National Urban League; Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; A. Philip Randolph, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, American Federation of Labor (AFL), and a former vice president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Walter P. Reuther, President, United Auto Workers Union; and Arnold Aronson, Secretary of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Credit: Public domain, available in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration, catalogued under the National Archives Identifier (NAID) 542010

Civil Rights **March on Washington**, D.C. Leaders of the march posing in front of the statue of Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln Memorial, 28 August 1963. Pictured are: (standing L-R) director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Matthew Ahmann, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader John Lewis, Protestant minister Eugene Carson Blake, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leader Floyd McKissick, and labor union leader Walter Reuther; (sitting L-R) National Urban League executive director Whitney Young, chairman of the Demonstration Committee Cleveland Robinson, labor union leader A. Philip Randolph, Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Roy Wilkins. Credit: Public Domain**,** available in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration, catalogued under the National Archives Identifier (NAID) 542063

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King, Jr and Joachim Prinz pictured, 1963 Credit: Public Domain, available in American Jewish Historical Society, American Jewish Congress records, undated, 1916-2006 (I-77)

The Honourable Judge **Annie Jiagge** , central committee, Geneva, 1980. Credit: Marc van Appelghem/WCC

Dr **Marie Assaad**, representing the World YWCA; Samuel Amissah, head of the All Africa Conference of Churches and Nathan M. Pusey, president of Harvard University, WCC Central Committee in Heraklion, Crete, Greece, August 1967. Credit: WCC

Metropolitan Paulos Gregorios, Dr **Brigalia Bam,** Edward W. Scott, executive committee meeting, Geneva, March 1976. Credit: John P. Taylor/ WCC

Chapter 4

Dame Dr **Ruth Nita Barrow** with Dr **Sylvia Ross Talbot** at the 5th Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya,1975. Credit: WCC

Pope John Paul II, Dr **Sylvia RossTalbot**, and Philip Potter, during the visit of the pope to the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, 12 June 1984. Credit: WCC

Dame Dr **Ruth Nita Barrow**, Programme to Combat Racism meeting, Lusaka, Zambia, 4–8 May 1987. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

Dr **Sylvia Ross Talbot** and John Paul II, during the visit of the pope to the Ecumenical Centre, 12 June 1984. Credit: WCC

Dr **Sylvia RossTalbot**, visit of the pope to the Ecumenical Centre 12 June 1984. Credit: WCC

Chapter 5

Dame Dr **Ruth Nita Barrow**, 6th Assembly, Vancouver, Canada, 1983. Credit: WCC

Dr **Mary Olivia Brookins Ross**, 4th Assembly, Uppsala, Sweden, 1968. Credit: WCC

Yvonne Delk, joint commissions/advisory group meeting, Evian, 9–16 May 1992. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

The Honourable Judge **Annie Jiagge**, 7th Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 1991. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

Agnes Abuom, president of the WCC central committee, Geneva, August 1999. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

The Honourable Judge **Annie Jiagge** and Dr **Brigalia Bam** at the 7th WCC Assembly, Canberra, 1991. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

The Honourable Judge **Annie Jiagge**, Pre-Assembly for Women, 6th Assembly, Vancouver, Canada, 1983. Credit: Peter Williams/WCC

Agnes Abuom. Credit: WCC

Chapter 6

Ms **Rena Karefa-Smart** speaking at the WCC Assembly in Evanston, 1954. Credit: WCC

The author, Rev. Dr **Angelique Walker-Smith**, during the 2016 Pan African

Women's Conference held at Howard University. Credit: Bread for the World. Used with permission.

Ms **Rena Karefa-Smart** (right) is shown the Christian art exhibition being held at the Yale Art Museum, in connection with the central committee meeting of the WCC. Her guide is Ms Mary Anne Pope, daughter of Dean Liston Pope of the Yale Divinity School. 1957. Credit: WCC

Dr **Brigalia Bam**, central committee meeting, Kingston, Jamaica, 1979. Credit: John P. Taylor/WCC

Nearly 50 women gathered for the **Pan-African Women of Faith Global Strategy Consultation** in Washington, D.C., on 9 November, 2018. Credit: Lacey Johnson, Bread for the World. Used with permission.

Dr **Brigalia Bam.** Credit: John P. Taylor/WCC

Women attending the **Pan African Women's Conference** participate in a pilgrimage throughout DC visiting sites significant to the roots of Africans. Sites include a slave market, the White House, and St Teresa of Avila in SE DC, among other locations. Credit: Joseph Molieri/Bread for the World. Used with permission.

Pan-African Women of Faith Summit group commemorating **Thursdays in Black**. Credit: Bread for the World. Used with permission.

Dr **Brigalia Bam** and Dr **Mercy Amba Oduyoye** at the 5th Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1975. Credit: John P. Taylor/WCC

Dr **Rena Karefa-Smart** speaking at Kirchentag, Frankfurt , 8–12 August 1956. Credit: WCC

Back Matter

Women worshipping during the **Pan African Women's Conference.** Those attending the conference participated in a worship service. They undertook a pilgrimage throughout D.C., visiting sites significant to the roots of Africans. Sites include a marketplace of enslaved African peoples, the White House, and church of St Teresa of Avila in SE D.C., among other locations. Credit: Joseph Molieri/ Bread for the World. Used with permission.

The author, Rev. Dr **Angelique Walker-Smith**, at a board commemorating the founding mothers of the Pan African Woman's Organization at the African Union exhibit (Addis Ababa). Credit: Provided by author

Women attending the **Pan African Women's Conference** participate in a pilgrimage throughout DC, visiting sites significant to the roots of Africans. Sites include a marketplace of enslaved African peoples, the White House, and St Teresa of Avila in SE DC, among other locations. Credit: Joseph Molieri/ Bread for the World

Oppressive and colonial histories often neglect to recognize the work and contributions of very significant people who have helped change the world. Added to this are cultural, socio-economic and patriarchal leanings that keep in the distant background the incredible and valuable work of women in shaping society, religion, politics, and economy. I am so pleased that the author of this book, Rev. Dr Angélique Walker-Smith, has taken the time and effort to document, recognize, and celebrate the gifts and contributions of women, especially Black women. I certainly applaud and commend this initiative and hope that we will continue to tell the untold stories and reveal the unknown legacies of courageous and remarkable women as we rewrite (his)tory and include (her)story. Well done to the author!
Rev. Dr Jerry Pillay, general secretary, World Council of Churches

Many times, important stories are relegated to the margins of history. What Rev. Dr Angelique Walker Smith, president from North America in the presidium of the World Council of Churches, has done is to elevate the early experiences and impact of pan-African women in the foundational years of modern ecumenism and its subsequent growth and expansion. These stories are essential, and they can be passed down from one generation to the next. Dive deeply and revisit yesterday's struggles and strength and move forward with fresh hopes for today and tomorrow.
Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, general secretary, National Council of Christian Churches in the USA

This book is a call for repentance and a message of righteousness, actions that are exemplified in Rev. Dr Walker-Smith's life journey. Her commitment to ecumenical issues also parallels the journey of the ecumenical movement. During my two terms as moderator of the central committee, I observed her engagement with, her contribution to, and her understanding of the women she acknowledges in the book. I pray that the current publication will become a call and reminder to the member churches and the ecumenical movement to endure in their advocacy for righteousness, continue giving voice to the voiceless, and impart the enriching gift of women. Redemption is through God only.
His Holiness Aram I, Armenian Orthodox Church, Holy See Cilicia.

Religion/Ecumenism/Women

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