

MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR AFRICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIANS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION (1989-2008)

Isabel Apawo Phiri¹

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989 – 2008). Going back to 1989 when the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle) was launched in Ghana, I have identified four major challenges that the African women theologians who are members of the Circle have had to contend with and which are still present. These are: (1) re-defining the identity of African women theologians; (2) promoting more women to study theology and be on permanent staff; (3) inclusion of African women's theology in the theological curriculum; and (4) collaboration with male theologians; As Oduyoye, has pointed out, there are many Africas, hence this paper is mainly based on my own social location. I am an African woman: whose theological education has only been through state universities; who benefited from the World Council of Churches, Programme on Theological Education scholarship fund for women without seeking permission from my Presbyterian church in Malawi; who has taught theology in an Ecumenical environment for twenty-four years, within five state universities in three countries in Southern Africa (Malawi, Namibia and South Africa); has been a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians since its inception in 1989; and Coordinated the Pan African Circle from 2002 to 2007. It is this background that will mostly influence my analysis of the challenges that African women theologians face in theological education in Africa. I also realise that some of the issues raised affect all women globally, although with different emphases. Before turning to the challenges facing African women in Theological education, it is necessary to introduce the Circle.

Introduction to the Circle

The Circle is a community of African women theologians who come together to reflect on what it means to them to be women of faith within

¹ Isabel Apawo Phiri is a Professor of African Theology in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Private Bag, X01, Scottsville, 3209, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Email: phirii@ukzn.ac.za. She was the General Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians from 2002 to 2007.

their experiences of religion, culture, politics and social-economic structures in Africa. “The Circle seeks to build the capacity of African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge using a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture. It empowers African women to actively work for social justice in their communities and reflect on their actions in their publications.”² The inspiration of having a Circle is attributed to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who is the main founder of the Circle.

From the outset, the Circle was inclusive in its membership and on the type of theology produced. African Women were defined as women who belong to diverse classes, races, cultures, nationalities and religions found on the African continent (Oduyoye, 2001b:10) and in the diaspora. This also meant bringing women from the different religions in Africa to reflect theologically together. Therefore, African women have diverse experiences of patriarchal oppression in religion and in society. The theologies that African women write about reflect this diversity. What is important is that African women theologians are united in voicing out their views against patriarchy.

Since its launch in 1989, the Circle has had three Pan African conferences, each focusing on a particular theme that reflects the issues that African women theologians are concerned about. In 1996, the second Pan African Conference took place in Nairobi, Kenya with the theme "Transforming Power, Women in the Household of God". This theme afforded the Circle to engage with what it means for African women to be Church. The third Pan African Conference took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in August 2002 with the theme "Sex, Stigma and HIV and AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices". Through this theme, the African women were highlighting the role played by sacred texts, the faith communities and African culture in fuelling and prevention of HIV and AIDS as it affects African women. The Circle's fourth Pan African Conference took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in September 2007 under the theme: “The Girl Child, Women, Religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa: A gendered perspective.” The high light of this conference was the realisation that women alone cannot stop the spread of HIV in Africa. It emphasised the importance of a community approach to prevent HIV. Therefore it was the focus on identifying liberating masculinities that was unique about this conference. I now turn to the challenges faced by African women theologians in theological education.

² These are the objectives of the Circle as reflected in the Circle draft constitution, 2007.

The Challenge to Re-define the Identity of African Women Theologians

The question of who is an African woman theologian has haunted the Circle from its inception. When the Circle was first launched, one of its priorities was to identify women in theological institutions to work together as a community of women so that they can produce their own theology that seeks the liberation of women from oppression and discrimination. Circle members were mandated to contribute their unique voice to the continental and global theological voice on issues of women. Since that time, the criterion for membership to the Circle has been writing and publishing theological literature. Nevertheless, the Circle did not want to limit the production of its theology only to those who reside in theological institutions. From the beginning it sought to be inclusive in its style of work. This has meant working with women from outside the disciplines of theology and religion within the academy. It has also meant the inclusion of women who, for various reasons ended their theological education at certificate, diploma and first degree level and are working in the church or have moved on to further their education in other disciplines outside theology and religion. Then there are those who are interested in issues that interface culture, religion and women in Africa, but do not have any theological background.³ It is for this reason that the Circle claims “elitism is not our way of life” (Oduyoye, 2001a:34). It is about doing theology in the community of women in the academy and in the communities of faith. It is also about acknowledging the community of women who share their knowledge with researchers.

As noted from the Circle vision and mission,⁴ research, writing and publishing on religion and culture from an African women’s perspective forms the core business of what the Circle is about. It is what distinguishes the Circle from other women’s organisations and movements in Africa. However, the reality is that writing for publication presupposes that one has skills to do research, to theologically reflect on the information and to write for publication. A look at the Circle

³ The 2007 draft constitution of the Circle recognises the two levels of African women theologians when it states: “The membership of the Circle shall be individual African women theologians who are committed to research, writing and publication. A woman theologian shall be defined as women who have studied religion and/or theology and religion at university departments, schools or faculties of Religious Studies/theology or in faith based theological institutions. A woman theologian shall also include a woman of faith from other disciplines who share the concerns of the Circle.”

⁴ The mission of the Circle is to undertake research, writing and publishing on African issues from women’s perspective. The vision of the Circle is to empower African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge. Theology, religion and culture are the three chosen foci, which must be used as the framework for Circle research and publications.

membership list⁵ and the quality of Circle books has shown that only a few Circle members have the capacity to write quality articles and books for publication. The Circle has noted this need for skills. As a result, at all its Pan African conferences, training in skills for writing for publication is given priority.

The Circle has also used its partnership with other organisations as an opportunity to enhance the research and writing skills of its members. For example, between 2002 and 2007, the Circle formed partnerships with Yale University Divinity School (hereafter YDS) and Yale School of Public Health, together with Yale University's Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS (hereafter CIRA) to offer fellowships to African women theologians who were theologically reflecting on HIV and AIDS.⁶ In total, twelve Circle members have benefited from spending four to nine months at Yale University as Faith fellows on research that deals with Gender, Faith and HIV and AIDS.⁷ This partnership afforded Circle members, the majority of whom are in theological education, to use public health and theological methodologies to conduct field research in the area of Gender, Faith and HIV and AIDS. Most of all, the time spent at Yale University gave Circle members access to resources, which are not always available in most African countries. The research generated has/will result in quality articles published in international academic journals and chapters in academic books. The African women theologians have continued to seek partnership of equals with other institutions to promote joint projects.

Furthermore, the Circle formed partnerships with the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa, World Council of Churches (*hereafter*, EHAIA) in 2006 in order to equip the Church in Africa to be HIV and AIDS competent. From 2003 to 2007, the Circle and EHAIA organised joint writing workshops and consultations in Moçambique and Angola in 2003 and 2004; in Benin, Rwanda, Botswana, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria in 2006 and 2007. It is through this partnership that the Lusophone Circle has managed to write and publish its ever first book. (Pereira and Cherinda 2007). The Circle's partnership with EHAIA also

⁵ In 2007 the Circle had 660 registered Circle members divided as follows: Anglophone members 522, Francophone members 83, and Lusophone members 55.

⁶ The agreement for the Circle partnership with YDS and CIRA was established during the Circle leadership of Dr Musimbi Kanyoro (1996 to 2002). It was implemented during my period of leadership of the Circle, 2002-2007. The Circle worked with Prof Letty Russell, Dr Shannon Clarkson, Prof Margaret Farley and Dr Kari Hartwig to make this dream a reality.

⁷ The list of the faith fellows include: Fulata Moyo (Malawi); Sylvia Amisi (Kenya); Vuadi Vibila (Democratic Republic of Congo); Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (Kenya); Dorothy Ucheaga (Nigeria); Teresa Tinkasimiire (Uganda); Constance Shisanya (Kenya); Isabel Phiri (Malawi); Dorcas Ankitunde (Nigeria), Hazel Ayanga (Kenya), Lillian Siwila (Zambia) and Bongiwe Dumezweni (South Africa).

gave the Circle an opportunity to evaluate the quality of its research and writing. In 2006, EHAIA sponsored Musa Dube to evaluate the work of the Circle on HIV and AIDS. The report (Dube 2006) was presented at the Circle EHAIA 2006 Consultation held in Johannesburg. This report showed where the gaps were in the Circle research and writing in the area of gender, faith and HIV and AIDS in Africa. In this way, future Circle researchers are given direction as to which themes they need to place emphasis upon.

The Circle's association with EHAIA highlighted for me some of the challenges faced in Lusophone Africa (Angola and Moçambique) where there are very few women in theological education. In the case of Moçambique, EHAIA sponsored the Circle to run workshops through the office of the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Churches in Moçambique. Over a period of five years, it became clear to me that without equipping the Circle members with higher theological education, it would be difficult to achieve the goals of the Circle in Lusophone Africa.

From my perspective, the real struggle that the Lusophone Circle has epitomised for the Circle is about identity of the African women theologians against the desire to be inclusive in our definition of who is an African woman theologian. While the Circle does not want to limit itself to the academy, the core mission of the Circle as described in this article opens itself to be described as an elitist movement. Tinyiko Maluleke, a prominent South African theologian and one of the few African male theologians who has taken seriously the contributions of the African women theologians towards theological education has made a profound critique of the Circle's self definition. I want to quote Maluleke at length here to highlight his challenge to the Circle. He argues that:

My sense is that although the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is in reality a circle of a higher class of women (and this holds true for chapters of the Circle all over the continent), this reality is not consciously foregrounded in the Circle's self definition. Within South Africa, my impressions and observations have been that the Circle has been becoming paler and whiter by the year, perhaps because in South Africa the class best positioned and therefore most able to execute the writing, speaking conferencing and publishing aims of the Circle are women of a paler shade. There is no doubt in my mind that the same situation obtains in chapters elsewhere on the continent, except that power

dynamics may not necessarily be displayed in skin colour. To a certain extent, the “Circle ideology”—to the extent that it does not foreground these kinds of differences overtly and boldly—is an ideology of exclusion. That exclusion is accomplished by means of ‘imperial’ inclusion of one and all- an ideology that denies difference (2001:248-249).

The critique of the Circle’s self-definition by Maluleke should make the Circle either re-define its core mission and vision or revisit its definition of who is a theologian and can become a member of the Circle. The Circle is between a stone and a hard place in that by definition, as a liberation movement it would not choose to discriminate against other African women, who, although they consider themselves theologians, are unable to fulfil the aims of the Circle and yet would like to remain members of the Circle. The Circle’s very existence is a protest against exclusion and discrimination in faith communities and society as a whole. The Circle does not deny that there are differences within its theologians. It is for such reasons that the Circle also takes seriously the Circle’s mentorship programme of African Academics who are seasoned researchers, mentoring those who have not published by co-publishing articles and/or co-editing academic books. Some examples of where such mentoring is taking place are: The Pietermaritzburg Circle at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and the St Paul’s Circle at the St Paul’s University, Limuru, Kenya are examples of this initiative. The quality of books and articles that have come from these two centres testify to the success of the mentoring programme. It becomes the responsibility of the current Circle leaders to intensify the Circle mentoring programme in all Circle chapters.

The Challenge to Empower Women to Study Theology and Teach in Theological Institutions

The Circle, as a protest movement against any form of exclusion and discrimination, and a promoter of fullness of life as intended by God, seeks to increase the number of women studying and teaching theology. African women who are in theological education are well-aware that the reluctance on the part of some churches to send women for theological education or the reluctance of some seminaries to admit women as students is a theological one. It is for this reason that African women theologians have generated many well-researched articles to engage the churches on their understanding of the humanity of women and the

African understanding of the church.⁸ The African women theologians have worked with some programmes of international faith organisations such the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the Council for World Mission to produce resources for the churches in Africa that promote the building of a community of women and men in the churches. It was through the Circle's own research and the joint work with the above mentioned institutions that it has been established that there are two challenging areas: the first is connected to the enrolment of women to study theology, and the second is connected to the recruitment of women on the staff of theological institutions.

Challenges that are linked to the enrolment of African women to study theology include the following: (a) there are still few women in theological education in Africa because the initial missionaries who came to Africa linked the study of theology with the ordained ministry. Although the mission churches became autonomous from their mission heritage, they continued with the policy of linking theological education to the ordained ministry. By so-doing, up to the present, theological education is out of reach for the majority of African women. (b) In line with point (a), some churches have allowed the enrolment of a few women in theological education for work among women. The painful part for women is that the men and women who enrol for theological education study the same content but in some cases receive different qualifications, while in others they get the same qualification but are assigned to different positions in the church. Women are made to work under the leadership of their male classmates. (c) There are a few women who study theology for the ordained ministry. While some churches have accepted the ordination of women, they nevertheless sponsor very few women to study theology. (d) Compared to enrolment of women in seminaries, there are many lay women in theological education, studying through theological education by extension or theological departments/schools in state universities. The majority of these women are not recognised in their churches as they were not sent by the church to study theology. (e) Many women who want to study theology through state universities and may have the approval of their churches nevertheless fail to meet the entrance qualifications because they did not receive a full school education. This is connected to the cultural perception that when families do not have enough money to educate all their children, priority is given to the boy children because they will grow up to be bread winners while girl children will be married off to men who

⁸ See the Circle publication Phiri and Nadar (2005).

will support them. (f) There are those women who do not want to study theology because they are not sure of employment opportunities outside the church as many people still have the perception that theology is for ordination only. (g) Scholarships too have an age limit, which works against many women who postpone their studies until later in life so that they can first have children and raise their families. By the time they plan to go back to further their theological studies, they have already past the qualifying age for funding. Thus, although they are able to secure a place for further studies in theology, they are deemed too old to qualify for a scholarship. (h) While a donor may have a policy to grant a certain percentage of the scholarships to women, experience in Africa has shown that the biggest problem is to get the approval of the church leaders to indorse the application form of a woman who wants to study theology but was not sent by her church. In this way, theological education still remains the sole privilege of only those who have been chosen by the churches to study theology. Yet, theological education must be for the whole people of God. While some funding institutions have recognised the receiving institution as the only authority to indorse a student's application for scholarship, this has been the exception and not the rule with most funding agencies.

In relation to the recruitment of women on the staff of theological institutions, the research of the Circle and its partners has shown that: (a) there are more theological institutions in Africa that have no women on its staff than those that recruit women. (b) Among the few women who are recruited to teach in theological institutions in Africa, the majority are teaching non-theological subjects. This means that a few lay/ordained women teach theological subjects. (c) The majority of lay women from University Theological schools/departments who are invited to teach theological subjects are either on a part-time basis or on limited term contracts. The disadvantage of not being on permanent employment is that one does not qualify to go on sabbatical leave so that one can concentrate on research and publication. Without publications, a staff member will not progress academically.

It is within this scenario that African women theologians who are in theological education see their role as educators of the church leadership and lay people about the ordained and lay ministry of women. They encourage many women to enrol in theological education even if their churches do not ordain women because theological education is not only for the ordained ministry but for the whole people of God. They play an advocacy role for the provision of good accommodation that is conducive to the process of learning for female theological students. They also play

an advocacy role by connecting African women with funding agencies, who are interested in promoting the theological education of African women.⁹

African women theologians who are in theological education work with the theological institutions to promote the employment of African women as lecturers of theological disciplines in permanent positions. This has proved to be a very frustrating exercise if the head of the institution does not share the vision of women empowerment in theological institutions. African women theologians write about such experiences so that they can theologically reflect on what is going on and thereby gain collective wisdom from other sisters who may have gone through a similar experience and managed to overcome it. The Circle mentoring programme works well not only in the context of student and staff relationship, but also among staff members. The experienced publishers pair up with the emerging scholars to transfer not only research and publishing skills, but also the entire programme of mentoring.

The Challenge of Engendering the Theological Education Curriculum in Africa

The Circle also promotes the teaching of gender issues in the theological curriculum. This means making gender as a concept in theological analysis. A gendered approach to theology refers to exposing the injustices that exist in the church, culture and the bible in the relationship between men and women. It acknowledges that human beings construct culture, therefore cultural practices in the bible and in our own cultures should not be confused with the will of God. It highlights the importance of acknowledging that both men and women are created in the image of God. The process of change requires an analysis of the African worldview and how people's identities are constructed (Phiri 2002).

The need for mainstreaming gender in theological education is a global one and has been well articulated by a number of theological conferences and scholars. A few examples from the international conferences, seminars and working groups will suffice to show the global awareness of the problem. In 1997, I was part of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions in Indonesia where it was highlighted that there is male domination of the theological curricular, staff, and student numbers and something must be done to redress the situation. I was also

⁹ The Ecumenical Theological Education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, The EMW in Germany, The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Yale Divinity School in the USA are some of our partners in the theological education of African women.

present when this was echoed at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Global Consultation on Theological Education in Rome in 1999 and at the PTE of the WCC Consultation on 'Viability of Theological Education and Ministerial Formation in Africa' in Kuruman, South Africa in 1995 (Phiri, 1995). The Lutheran World Federation took the lead at a global level to begin the process of engendering the theological education by organising a consultation on 'Engendering Theological Education for Transformation,' held in Montreux, Switzerland, 4-8 November 2001. The report of this consultation has been widely circulated to stimulate further discussions on engendering theological education.

It was in this global context and taking its cue from the ETE of the 2002 World Council of Churches Conference on 'The Journey of Hope Continued' that the Circle embarked on the process of engendering the Theological Education Curriculum project sponsored by the Ecumenical Theological Education of the World Council of Churches. Workshops were held in Johannesburg in 2004 and in Benini in 2005 to work on engendering the theological curriculum in Anglophone and Francophone Africa. This project resulted in the production of handbooks to be shared with theological institutions in Africa.¹⁰ However, the Circle's greatest challenge has been the circulation of its literature to the theological institutions in Africa and making sure that the books are being used to contribute to the shaping of the religious leadership on the continent.

Conscious of the fact that most theological institutions in Africa follow a curriculum that reflects the old European list of classical religion and theological courses, the Circle members who are at St Paul's University, University of KwaZulu-Natal and Institute of Women, Religion and Culture Trinity have developed strong libraries to sustain undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Gender and Religion. As of 2008, it is only University of KwaZulu-Natal that offers full degrees at Honours, Masters and PhD level in Gender and Religion written on the certificate. While many students would like to enrol in this programme because they know that the contents of the course will be of benefit for the church in Africa, some students have also expressed the fear that their Bishops would not approve of their certificate showing Gender and Religion next to the name of the degree as done at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.¹¹

¹⁰ Publications still in progress include: Phiri Isabel Apawo and Musa W. Dube (eds.) *The Engendering Theological Curriculum Handbook*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. Already published: Yinda Helene et Ngalula J. *Changer la Theologie, Transformer la Societe. Programme d'education et formation theologique de genre et feminisme*. Yaoundé-Bafoussam. Editions Cle et Cipre 2007. See also Phiri (2005b).

¹¹ For example the named degrees show as follows Bachelor of Theology (honours) (Gender and Religion); Masters in Theology (Gender and Religion) and Doctor of Theology (Gender and Religion)

The engendering of the theological curriculum is done at three levels. The first level is to advocate for the inclusion of gender issues in all disciplines and in each course that is being taught in theological institutions. Second, it means offering gender courses as electives at introductory, intermediate and advanced levels. The third level means offering a whole programme in Gender and theology/Religion, with a designated chair at postgraduate level. This means that when a post is advertised for gender and religion/theology, it specifies that the incumbent will be responsible for the coordination of the engendering of the theological curriculum as well as giving leadership to the Gender and Religion postgraduate programme. As of May 2008, such a chair was created in the School of Religion and Theology, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.¹²

The Challenge of Collaborating with African Male Theologians

The African women theologians in theological education are aware that the success of the engendering the theological curriculum is connected to their collaboration with African male theologians in the academy and the churches. Thus from the onset, the Circle did not introduce African women's theology as a replacement for African theology, but as an addition to the missing voice in African theology. Hence, it is with gratitude that the Circle acknowledges those African male theologians who have walked alongside the Circle to affirm its voice. Those who have been overt in their support of the work of the Circle are many, but at the risk of leaving some names out, I would want to especially acknowledge the following: John Pobee, who through PTE and ETE has been in the forefront to seek African women and encourage them to study theology. I am one of his products. Even in his writings, he has encouraged other men to take seriously the emergency of African Women's Theology. In the Ecumenical review of July 2001, whose theme was 'Transforming Ecumenism in Africa in the 21st Century,' a number of articles paid homage to the contribution of the Circle in ecumenical formation in Africa. Some examples of African male theologians who spoke positively of the contribution of the Circle to theological formation were given by Sam Kobia (2001:295-305) and John Pobee (2001:319-332).

Simon Maimela is another African male theologian, who used his space at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to offer courses that included

¹² Dr Sarojini Nadar is the first Circle member to be appointed in a permanent position as the coordinator of a postgraduate programme in Gender and Religion.

the work of African women theologians. This accumulated in the book that he co-edited with Adrio König entitled, *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*. Christina Landman and Mercy Oduyoye have articles on African Women's Theology and African Women's Hermeneutics respectively. John Mbiti also dialogues with African women theologians. It has now become fashionable to include articles by African women theologians in any edited book that is penned by African male theologians. However, it is Tinyiko Maluleke (1997, 2001), Laurent Magesa (2005) and Ogbu Kalu (2006) who have heeded the call of African women theologians in theological education's call for serious and deliberate critical engagement with African women theologians.

The current emergence of articles written by African male theologians on issues on masculinities¹³ form other important examples of African men and women theologians collaborating in teaching, research and writing on gender issues. Discussions on masculinities took centre stage at the Circle 2007 Pan African Conference when in partnership with the World Council of Churches (EHAIA) it organised two panels for the Circle to dialogue with African male theologians on the topic of 'Liberating Masculinities and Combating HIV & AIDS.'¹⁴ What is important is that such presentations and discussions form the resources that African women theologians would like to see being used by students and staff in theological institutions.

The biggest challenge of the Circle remains to motivate more male students and staff of theological institutions to be in dialogue with the literature produced by African women theologians.

Conclusion

After some nineteen years of existence, African Women theologians have gained recognition in the theological arena at a local and global level. It has achieved its objective of increasing theological literature for the academic use of theological institutions in Africa and it is also gaining the attention of theological debates in the Northern hemisphere through its partnership of equals with theological institutions. Its ethos of being

¹³ See the *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12/1, (2006) and 14/1 (2008), which are dedicated to a discussion about issues on masculinities by African male theologians.

¹⁴ The titles of the presentations were as follows: HIV and AIDS and Masculinities (Dr Ezra Chitando); The Bible and Manhood in African Culture (Prof Tinyiko Maluleke); Church and Masculinity (Prof Ka Mana); Youth and Masculinity (Mr. Zeferino Teko); Modern Masculinities (Dr Manoj Kurian); Colonial/Rural-Urban Masculinities (Rev Dinis Matsolo); Amnon, Son of David: Subverting Biblical Masculinity (Prof Gerald West); ANARELLA and Masculinities (Rev. Johannes Heath).

inclusive in: (1) its definition of African women theologians; (2) its promotion of an increased enrolment of female students and employment of more female staff; (3) its contribution to the process of engendering the theological curriculum in Africa; (4) its overt efforts to promote collaboration with African male theologians go a long way to show that the Circle is built firmly on the concept of community. There are many theological institutions that fear the work of the African women theologians because they have misconceptions of what is understood by gender analysis in theological curriculum. This challenge can only be expelled through a balanced education of all the people of God. We need to educate the churches and theological institutions locally and globally that the community of women and men should work together to decide on the type of theology that should be taught in the theological institutions. If indeed the church acknowledges that God gives gifts to both women and men for the common good of the church, then it needs to transform itself to support in word and action the theological education of both men and women. This requires the realisation that according to the signs of our times, theological education should no longer be seen as training soldiers of Christ to wade off heresy, but servants of Christ: willing to build a community of women and men.

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