

The birth and growth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi 1989-2011

Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler¹

Research Associate, Department of Church History and Polity,
Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

JW Hofmeyr

Extraordinary Professor, Department of Church History and Polity,
Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Abstract

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

Introduction

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was established in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. Before that, in 1988, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian, organised a group of African women theologians to form a planning group. These women met as an International Planning Committee (IPC) in Geneva, Switzerland. The Circle had several objectives, but the key aims were researching, writing and publishing on women's issues in the realm of religion and culture. To promote this movement among women in Africa, it was decided at the official opening of the Circle in 1989 that country Circles should be started so that African theologians in every country can contribute to the work of the Circle.

In this article, I want to investigate why two of the Continental Circle Coordinators are Malawians but the genesis and growth of the Malawi chapter have been slow. I will therefore write the history of the Malawi Circle with the following objectives: Firstly, to describe the contributions of the two Continental Circle Coordinators from Malawi to the historical development of the Malawi Circle and the objectives of the Continental Circle; secondly, to indicate and analyse some factors that influenced the development of the Circle in Malawi; and thirdly, to evaluate factors that point to a brighter future for the Malawi Circle.

This article is based on Circle literature and personal interviews by the author. The author will analyse the information thus obtained from historical and feminist perspectives.

Isabel Apawo Phiri as the mother of the Malawi Circle (1989-2011)

When we talk of the official Circle in Malawi, Isabel Apawo Phiri is regarded as the mother of the Circle. She was one of the participants at the Convocation of the Circle in 1989. She did not start the Malawi Circle in 1989 because at that time she was doing her PhD at the University of Cape Town.² She established the Circle in 1993 when she was residing in Malawi and was a member of the Church

¹ This article is based on the PhD thesis: "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989-2007): History and theology" submitted at the Department of Church History and Polity, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State in 2010 under the promotorship of Prof JW Hofmeyr.

² Her PhD has been published as Phiri 1996/2000.

of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod in Southern Malawi.³ She was then a lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi.

At the time Isabel Phiri started the Circle, there had been an awareness of women's empowerment issues within Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods. This was due to the influence of Silas Ncozana, a clergyman of the Blantyre Synod. He organised a women's meeting at Chigodi Women's Centre near Blantyre in 1990. At this meeting, women's empowerment issues were discussed. Silas Ncozana was the General Secretary of Blantyre Synod at that time. However, this first meeting did not commit itself to research and publications on women's issues because it was not a Circle meeting. The women, who attended the Chigodi meeting, came from the same Presbyterian background and understood themselves as a fellowship group rather than as an academic group. At the Chigodi meeting, Christine Manda was present, who had attended the Convocation.⁴ However, she did not consolidate the group to the task of researching and publishing on women's issues. Isabel Apawo Phiri captured it in this way:

The idea of Malawian women theologians coming together to identify their concerns was in response to the inauguration of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture which is being run by the Circle of African Women Theologians. It is not clear to us as to why they did not call themselves the Malawi Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Phiri [1996] 2000:121).

Contributions of Isabel Apawo Phiri to the Malawi Circle

Phiri's first contribution is that she organised the Malawi Circle. The home of the Circle was Chancellor College. The Circle started with a bang when about 50 women came together at its launch (Phiri/Moyo 2005). These were students, lecturers and churchwomen from the surrounding community. Not all participants were trained in theology; some simply came because they were concerned from a faith perspective.

From 1993 to 1995, the Malawi Circle experienced growth in terms of its size and its part in fulfilling Circle objectives. The strength of the Malawi Circle at this time lay in the fact that Phiri aligned the Malawi Circle to the Circle objectives. She had support from women academics in other fields, who were interested in researching and writing about women's issues. They were Nyovani Madise from Statistics, Flora Nankhuni from Economics, and Linda Semu from the Sociology Department.

Phiri's second contribution was that she organised a second Malawi Circle conference in 1994. The meeting took place at Phiri's house in Chirunga. This was a follow-up meeting to the first one at which the women had been challenged to do more research on the theme, "Violence against women" (Phiri/Moyo 2005).

Phiri's third contribution was that the Malawi Circle did research on women's issues and even wrote papers and made them public through the media in 1995. However, the growth of the Malawi Circle was affected negatively from 1995 to 1996 because of two major reasons: Firstly, the reaction to the joint research by the Chancellor College community in 1995 was negative. Secondly, Isabel Phiri left Malawi for Southern Africa.

In July 1995, Isabel Phiri, on behalf of the four researchers mentioned above, presented the findings from the research on rape and sexual harassment at educational institutions at Chancellor College, as a case study (Phiri 2000) at the University of Malawi research dissemination conference in Mangochi. Although this was a joint paper, Phiri was attacked, primarily because she had presented it. Her house was stoned, her office was damaged, and her name came into disrepute. Phiri left Chancellor College in April 1996 for Namibia because of this incident. The Malawi Circle did not hold any further meetings during this period.⁵

Phiri's third contribution was participating in the promotion of women's ordination in Blantyre Synod. She was with Getrude Kapuma when some women marched against Blantyre Synod's policy of barring women from the ordained ministry in 1995. This march contributed to a later decision of Blantyre Synod to ordain women as clergy.

Phiri's fourth contribution was mentoring the four key members of the Malawi Circle (Getrude Kapuma, Fulata Lusungu Moyo, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler and Molly Longwe) in researching and writing on women's issues at various levels. Phiri mentored these women by encouraging them to write

³ In Malawi, Livingstonia Synod, Blantyre Synod and Nkhoma Synod are sister churches that belong to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian General Synod.

⁴ For more details, see Phiri 1996/2000. For her paper, see Manda 2001.

⁵ See Phiri 1996/2000, for details about this incident.

and conduct research on women's issues and to attend continental and regional Circle conferences. This led to their work being published in Circle publications. Currently, Phiri is supervising the PhD research of Molly Longwe on Baptist pastors' wives in Malawi. Phiri has also always been available for consultations for PhD research conducted by Fulata Moyo and Rachel Fiedler. This contact has been a key factor in modelling these women for Circle research and writing.

Phiri's fifth contribution to the Malawi Circle is her writings, especially her book on religious experiences of Chewa women in Nkhoma Synod (Phiri [1996] 2000).

Her writings have increased Malawian women's (and men's) interest in the agenda of the Circle. These have often been included in the literature lists of lecturers and students who are involved in mainstreaming gender issues in their courses in Malawi.

Fulata Moyo as the second coordinator of the Malawi Circle (1996-2003)

Fulata Lusungu Moyo became a member of the Malawi Circle in 1994, having just finished her MA course at the University of Zimbabwe. She was in the same Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Chancellor College with Isabel Phiri. She was privileged to work with her from 1994 to 1995 when Phiri left Chancellor College. This made it easy for Moyo to take over the leadership of the Malawi Circle.

In 1996, Fulata Moyo reorganised the Circle, again capitalising on her post as the Secretary of the Board for Theological Studies.⁶ From this vantage position, she was able to lobby women who were lecturing theology at the affiliated theological colleges in Malawi to participate in the Malawi Circle. This was after she had attended the 1996 Nairobi Circle meetings (Phiri & Moyo 2005). Moyo led the Malawi Circle from 1996 to 2003.

Contributions of Fulata Moyo to Malawi Circle

Moyo's first contribution was to hold the third and fourth Malawi Circle conferences at Chancellor College in 1996 and 1998 respectively. Her second contribution was that she promoted research and writing on women's issues during her leadership of the Malawi Circle. Her third contribution was that she took the Malawi Circle beyond the confines of Chancellor College and the Presbyterian Synods.

The theme of the third Malawi Circle conference was "The role of women in the Church." This was in line with the recommendations of the Study Commission on Women Biographies initiated at the 1996 Circle conference.⁷

No other woman, apart from Fulata Moyo from the first Malawi Circle under Isabel Phiri, attended this conference. This was the first challenge Moyo faced in reorganising the Malawi Circle. The second challenge was that this new Malawi Circle could not be consolidated into a research and writing group (Circle 2006:36). The third challenge was that this new Malawi Circle had a high rate of participation of women from church-based theological colleges. The fourth challenge was that most members came from evangelical theological institutions.

This new Malawi Circle comprised of women from theological colleges that were members of the Board for Theological Studies, for example, Rachel Fiedler, Molly Longwe, Late Mary Banda, and Martha Chirwa from the Baptist Convention, Myra Wilson, Ruth Folayan, and one student from EBCOM (Evangelical Bible College of Malawi, Blantyre). Chinangwa was the only woman who came from Blantyre Synod. She is now serving as an ordained minister in the same Synod. At that time, she was a student at Zomba Theological College.

The fact that this group was composed of a significant number of women from an evangelical background posed some limitations to the growth of the Circle, as these women did not study the kind of feminism and liberation theologies promoted by the Circle.

The other limitation to this group was "evangelical theology" itself. It tended to be conservative and uncritical to women's oppression in church and society. This was clear from evangelical theology writings. Even though these women wrote about women's leadership in the Church, their papers were not critical of the patriarchal hegemonic relationships that existed within these structures. Most of them, apart from Chinangwa, were very much at home with the roles they fulfilled in their particular churches. Molly Longwe was a lecturer at the Baptist Theological Seminary and a pastor's wife. She had no inclination of becoming a pastor at that time. The Baptist church does not ordain women pastors.⁸ Martha Chirwa and Mary Banda were also pastors' wives in the Baptist church. At that time,

⁶ This Board relates theological colleges and seminaries through the Department of Theology and Religious Studies to the University of Malawi, so that the diplomas and degrees are awarded jointly by the University and the Board.

⁷ The other study commissions were on cultural hermeneutics, Biblical hermeneutics, and women and theological studies.

⁸ For a critical analysis of the issue, see Longwe 2008.

Martha Chirwa was still in training. Chinangwa was the only woman who sought a feminist theology that would affirm her in her passion to be a pastor.⁹

The EBCOM group was definitely comfortable in their position. It became clear that some papers on women's liberation presented at the fourth Circle meeting were unpalatable to them.

The focus of the fourth Malawi Circle conference held in 1998 was on the theme of HIV and AIDS. Anna Khota, who also attended the conference, was a member of EBCOM. The other women from EBCOM, who had attended the third Malawi Circle, did not come to this meeting. Women from the Baptist Theological Seminary attended. The rest of the participants consisted of Chancellor College students. This means that the Malawi Circle was among the first Circle chapters to research and write about HIV and AIDS issues, long before the 2002 Circle Continental Conference was held in Addis Ababa, where this issue was mainstreamed. Several papers were generated at this conference. This was the last Malawi Circle conference organised by Moyo before she went to Pietermaritzburg in 2003 for her PhD on sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Malawi, which she completed in 2009 (Moyo 2009). She did not return to Malawi but instead accepted the appointment to the Women's Desk of the WCC in Geneva in 2008. In the same year, she was elected the Continental Coordinator of the Circle.

Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler as Malawi Circle Coordinator 2003-2011

The Malawi Circle became the weakest when Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler took over the role as Malawi Circle Coordinator. She did not manage to take forward the Circle momentum that had been re-established by Moyo, regardless of the fact that she started to lead the Malawi Circle with a large following. She held the fifth Malawi Circle conference in 2005. At this conference, women from the Presbyterian churches, the Baptist church and the Anglican Church attended. The theme for this Malawi Circle conference was gender, health and religion. Many papers were generated at this time.

Fiedler organised a sixth Malawi Circle conference in 2007. This conference had no theme, as it was organised mainly for Isabel Apawo Phiri, who was the then Continental Coordinator of the Circle, to speak to the group about the Circle. More faculty members from Chancellor College attended this conference, apart from other women theologians. However, Fiedler failed to consolidate this group because of the following reasons:

Firstly, she was just learning about Circle research and writing. Secondly, she had less time to mentor women in the Circle because she was only a part-time lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in Chancellor College. Much of her time was spent on community work as the Director of the Lydia Foundation, which she had organised during the 2001/02 famine. She also spent considerable time researching and writing her PhD thesis, which she completed in 2011.

Thirdly, she left Chancellor College in 2008 and joined Mzuzu University as a full-time lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies. Because of distance, she could not consolidate the Malawi Circle that is housed at Chancellor College in Zomba. Although Chimwenwe Katumbi is a member of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Chancellor College, she has not shown interest in becoming a member of the Malawi Circle. Therefore, at this moment, it is likely that the Mzuzu University will house the Malawi Circle.

Gertrude Kapuma and the Malawi Circle

With the return of Gertrude Kapuma from South Africa, it was envisaged that another local chapter would start in Blantyre under her leadership. However, this did not happen. This is surprising because she is a close friend of Phiri and the two have been intensely involved in the South African Circle, especially when Kapuma was a student at the University of Fort Hare. She obtained her Masters in theology in South Africa.

Secondly, Kapuma and Phiri contributed significantly to initiation of the ordination of women in the Blantyre Synod in Malawi. They were involved in the meetings in preparation of the march against the Blantyre Synod's restrictive stand on the ordination of women in the Synod. This means that Kapuma has actually been very proactive in the promotion of the agenda of the Circle.

However, the Church's stand on the protest was a deterrent to women in ministerial formation to join the Circle in Malawi (Kapuma 2002).¹⁰ Being a Circle member was seen as being aggressive towards the church. The action of the church, which resulted in Kapuma being suspended and led to her leaving for South Africa, did not encourage women in ministerial formation to join the Circle either.

⁹ She achieved this after the CCAP Blantyre Synod finally lifted the restrictions on the ordination of women.

¹⁰ Blantyre Synod has since changed its position and started to ordain women pastors, Kapuma being one of them.

The fact that both Phiri and Kapuma left Malawi because of reasons connected to being members of the Circle negatively affected the Circle in Malawi.

Introducing key factors that may have influenced the Malawi Circle

Although Circle chapters in different African countries are influenced differently, chances are high that the factors, which inhibited or promoted the Malawi Circle, could be relevant to the formation of chapters in other countries in Africa as well. Some of these factors have already been highlighted in the earlier paragraphs. The task of this section is to identify those that have not been highlighted earlier. First, the time at which the Circle was established has a bearing on the development of the Circle. Although the establishment of the Circle in Malawi lagged behind, compared to some other countries, it was not at the bottom of the scale. Other countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia organised their Circles much later. However, this time lag has meant that the Malawi Circle does not have the same in-depth knowledge of Circle theology than other country Circles do, which have taken the lead.

Secondly, to be a Circle member one must have an academic interest in the field of feminist and gender studies. This is the licence that opens doors to liberation, feminist issues and methodologies. This interest would equip one to either become a member or open Circle chapters in one's area. In Malawi, such an academic world would be the secular universities that promote feminist ideas. Currently, Chancellor College (of the University of Malawi) and Mzuzu University are the key academic institutions doing this. Contrary to these institutions, most church-based theological colleges and seminaries in Malawi do not promote such ideas to their students. Phiri, who had been exposed to feminist and liberation theologies when she went to study abroad for her PhD in Cape Town,¹¹ made the genesis of the Circle possible at Chancellor College. This exposure has energised her to start the Circle. In 2008, Mzuzu University introduced courses in feminist theologies, liberation theology and gender studies. This has created a fertile ground for the genesis of the Circle at Mzuzu University in the coming years.

The third point is that Circle history has revealed that country Circles, which had members who were members of the International Planning Committee and the 1989 Convocation, often grew faster. They were likely to digest the Circle's agenda and develop country Circles from an informed point of view.

The projection of what Malawi academic women could have achieved if they had been present at the IPC and at the First Convocation in 1989 is justified by the history of the Circle, which shows that countries that have had such representation are thriving better than those that did not. An example of this trend is the Kenyatta University Chapter in Kenya, where Sr Annie Nasimiyu, who was present at the 1989 Convocation, played a major role in establishing and developing chapters in Kenya.

Similarly, the Malawi Circle had a more reputable status when Phiri, who had been present at the 1989 Convocation, led the Malawi Circle. This is why she helped open other country chapters when she left Malawi, one of which was the Cape Town Circle.¹² However, attending the 1989 Convocation is not the only prerequisite for efficient development of country chapters. Christine Manda, who also attended the Convocation, did not organise the Malawi Circle, probably because she was not an academic. Therefore, even though she became involved with this feminist and liberation movement, she was probably more interested in keeping her position in the church, as the early winds of liberation were too radical for some women. She was a church worker in the Synod of Livingstonia (CCAP). For the Circle, engaging in research and writing was crucial and this goal was probably less appealing to someone working in a non-academic setting such as the church. If she were an academic at a University college, research and writing publishable papers would have been compulsory, since such papers are important in one's development. It is not only in Malawi where women who had been part of the 1989 Convocation did not initiate a country Circle. Although Brigalia Bam organised the first South African national Circle in 1990 in Johannesburg, she did not personally develop the South African Circles.

Fifth, some women refrain from Circle membership because they are afraid to be rejected by their communities if they align themselves to the feminist theologies the Circle advances.

In the Christian community, belonging to a fellowship of believers is important and if this is at stake, it threatens one's survival in terms of emotional and spiritual support. This is, among other reasons, why the Malawi Circle has struggled to retain some of its members throughout its existence. A

¹¹ This is reflected in Phiri 1988 and Phiri 1989.

¹² Phiri, I.A. 2000. Stand up to be counted: identity, spirituality and theological education in my journey of faith, in *Claiming our foot prints: South African women reflect on context, identity and spirituality*, edited by D Ackerman, E Gateman, H Cotze and J Tobler. Stellenbosch: ESSA Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research: 145–160.

separate group that Phiri started testifies to this reality. It had a considerably larger following than that of the earlier Malawi Circle. Many women were attracted to this group because it centred on an objective that was different from that of the Malawi Circle. The goal of this group was to fellowship among believers. These women were largely keen churchgoing women who were interested in the deepening of their faith, and as such, they considered themselves to have a mission to encourage other women in the group in their faith within the Chancellor College neighbourhood. Although some of the members came from the academic staff of the college, the objective of the group was to have an evangelistic mission.¹³ It is clear that some of the women, who had left the Malawi Circle, felt threatened by the ideologies of the Circle.

Some women distanced themselves from the Malawi Circle after the research findings on sexual harassment on Chancellor College campus had been presented. Here the national radio picked up (largely wrong) bits of information and broadcast that 50% of the girls on Chancellor College campus were raped. At this time, the environment in Malawi had not yet opened up to speaking overtly about sexual matters. This research was therefore culturally sensitive. Surprisingly, even educated people at Chancellor College were still “dressed” in this cultural conservatism. The findings incited Chancellor College staff and students and led to violence, which culminated in students stoning Phiri’s house and office. These people were not angered because of the frequent sexual abuse and sometimes even rape that had taken place on campus, but because these women dared speak out about such a taboo topic (Phiri 1996). This incidence scared some members off the Malawi Circle.

A sixth point is that if members of the country Circles are linked to ecumenical bodies which promote women’s issues, they are likely to make a positive contribution to the development of their country Circles. Phiri and Moyo were in touch with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and were exposed to its activities. Phiri was exposed to:

[w]omen’s issues at the consultations and meetings of the programme on Theological Education (now called Ecumenical Theological Education) of the World Council of Churches from 1984 to 1989 (Phiri [1996] 2000:7).

In fact, the inspiration to study the religious experiences of the Chewa women of Nkhoma Synod was received at the 1989 Convocation of the Circle (Phiri [1996] 2000:7). To further her studies, Phiri received a WCC scholarship when studying for her PhD, and she acknowledged it in her book (Phiri [1996] 2000:7). The WCC was key to the development of women’s theologies since its beginnings.

Although this was the period, during which Mercy Amba Oduyoye “was finding others”, Phiri was not a likely candidate to participate in the International Planning Committee at that stage because she did not belong to EATWOT (to which members of the International Planning Committee belonged).

Moyo also benefited from her connection with the WCC in her development of Circle theologies because she too received her first PhD funding from WCC. This WCC exposure connected women to feminist and liberation theologies that prepared them to write Circle theology. Since connection to the WCC in the early years was more readily available to member churches, women who belonged to non-WCC member churches did not have such a privilege of being exposed to feminist and liberation theologies unless they studied at secular universities. This reality had a negative impact on the development of the Malawi local chapter.

The seventh factor that promotes or inhibits country chapters is openness to women’s leadership in churches. Churches promoting patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women in church and society are a deterrent to the progress of country Circles. These churches usually (1) assign lower positions to women in church than to men, based on a wrong interpretation of Scripture; and (2) train men and not women in theology because of the belief that men are called to be pastors. In Malawi, few churches promote women’s ordination, which is one of the reasons why some do not join the Malawi Circle.

The eighth factor that influences the growth of country Circles is the availability of and access to Circle books. The lag in the development and growth of the Malawi Circle is also attributed to the limited availability of and access to Circle books. Circle books have contributed to the sensitisation of women in Africa to join the Circle. Through these books, women are exposed to similar experiences in Africa, which are of concern to women. Circle books also expose women to Circle methodologies and frameworks that women can use to write Circle publications. However, for a long time, the only Circle

¹³ In comments at a Circle seminar in 2006, Bishop Kalilombe suggested that if the Circle was confessional, it faced a lack of progress in achieving Circle goals.

book that students at Chancellor College were exposed to was the one written by Phiri ([1996] 2000). Access to Circle books published elsewhere was difficult. On this, Musimbi Kanyoro comments:

We hope that our books will receive wider readership now that they can easily be accessed (through the Web), but this will not happen if we continue to use publishers who are themselves unknown. The first Circle book, *The will to arise*, published by Orbis in 1992 [Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992], is in its fifth printing and easily purchased abroad, but not in Africa. Musa Dube's two books, *Other ways of reading* [Dube 2001] and *Post colonial feminist interpretations of the Bible* [Dube 2000], are as easily available in Africa as they are in the West. Those published on our continent are not easily available and consequently not widely read (Phiri & Nadar 2006).

Apart from the logistical problems in delivering books to Malawi and other countries, the lack of a course on feminist theology in a Department of Theology and Religious Studies does not encourage that University to stock books on the Circle. This point is verified by how other departments in Africa have attracted Circle books to their libraries through running feminist studies in the department. St Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya, the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture in Accra, Ghana, and the School of Religion at KwaZulu-Natal University in Pietermaritzburg are key departments that have attracted Circle books to their libraries through running feminist courses. By reading such Circle books women in Malawi would have been sensitised to join the Circle. The introduction of feminist courses at Mzuzu University points to the possibility that Mzuzu University might become the home of the Malawi Circle in the years to come because Circle books are read widely at this University, as they are part of the requirement for the African feminist theological courses.

Participation of men in women's issues of liberation

Against the backdrop of the above restrictions imposed on women regarding theological training, a clear voice can be heard of some men in key positions in the church, who are encouraging women to be trained in theological studies at a higher level. Among these men are those who allowed and supported their wives to study theology at a higher level. In the Baptist Convention, Akim Chirwa, Hany Longwe and Klaus Fiedler are examples. Akim Chirwa supported Martha Chirwa to study theology even as an independent student at Zomba Theological College. Apart from encouraging Molly Longwe to undergo theological training, Hany Longwe made some space available at the Baptist Seminary for women to study theology. In this way, Liddah Kalako was able to undergo seminary training.¹⁴ Since then, more women have studied theology at the Baptist Theological Seminary.¹⁵ From the discussion above, it is clear that not only one approach can be followed to encourage women from Baptist churches to enrol in a Department of Theology and Religious Studies at one of the universities or at other colleges of higher learning.¹⁶ The increase in the number of Baptist women studying theology would not have materialised without the sponsorship that Klaus Fiedler had organised for them from Germany.

The increase in the number of women trained in theology in Blantyre Synod (CCAP) can be traced back to the time when Rev Silas Ncozana was the General Secretary from 1985 to 1995 (Phiri 1995:1). It was during his time that the first meeting of Women in Theology was convoked in Malawi. At that time, Blantyre Synod also deliberately invited female reverends from abroad to work in the Synod with the intention of sensitising women to positions of leadership, even at the level of the ordained ministry. Among these women were Peggy Reid, a Canadian minister, and Rev Jane Kamau from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (Phiri [1996] 2000:138).

Since the intervention of Silas Ncozana, Zomba Theological College has contributed positively to the development of Malawi Circle leadership through involving women at leadership level and recruiting them as students. Phiri was recruited to teach some courses at this college, while Moyo taught at the same institution on sexuality and HIV/AIDS together with her late husband, Solomon Moyo. Rachel Fiedler not only taught the wives' course, but was also enrolled at the college for a diploma course. Martha Chirwa earned her first degree (BDiv) from the same college. Currently, two Circle members, Mercy Mgeni and Jannie Chalimba, are employed in the Women's Department and they are both actively involved in the Circle.¹⁷

¹⁴ Before entering the Seminary she was an evangelist, church planter and pastor. She entered the Seminary as a widow and died two months after completing the course (Longwe 2011:114, 174, 245, 268-273).

¹⁵ Currently there are five women among the over 40 students, two of them doing the Diploma in order to continue to the BA (Theology) course in third year.

¹⁶ Several women studied at the [Evangelical] African Bible College in Lilongwe.

¹⁷ Jannie Chalimba has by now finished her MA (Chalimba 2011)

The future of the Malawi Circle

The history of the Malawi Circle shows that it has struggled to grow. The factors, which influenced the Malawi Circle either positively or negatively, were highlighted and analysed above. This weak growth happened in spite of the fact that the Malawi Circle has boasted two Circle continental leaders. It is time that the women who have influenced the Circle in Africa start developing the Malawi Circle so that it can become a model to other country Circles. Those women who have led the Circle in Malawi should take certain steps in order to make the Malawi Circle grow stronger. Firstly, they should increase access to Circle books in Malawi theological institutions. Secondly, they should help mobilise resources to re-establish the Circle. The starting point might be to have a nationwide Circle conference at which Circle objectives and the story of the Malawi Circle could be highlighted.

Thirdly, they should collaborate with women theologians who are serving as faculty members at secular and church-based institutions. The aim of such cooperation would be to influence curriculum reforms to promote feminist and gender theological studies in Malawi. These women should try to encourage women in Malawi, who have an understanding of the Circle, to reorganise the Circle in Malawi. This should include identifying women theologians who can help mentor other women in their conducting of Circle research and writing.

Finally, they should lobby for scholarships for more women theologians in Malawi so that they can obtain higher theological qualifications.

The introduction of feminist courses at Mzuzu University is slowly building a culture of accepting feminist theological research as a popular discipline of theology. Already a good number of theses at first-degree level have been written in this realm.¹⁸ This interest has filtered through to the postgraduate programme.¹⁹

Works consulted

- Banda [Fiedler], Rachel NyaGondwe 2005. *Women of Bible and culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere.
- Cavannes, Barbara 2006. God calling women in Pentecostal Missions, in McClung, Grand (ed.), *Azusa Street and beyond*, 53-66. Gainesville: Bridge-Logos.
- Chalimba, Jannie 2011. Daughters of the King. Women in CCAP Blantyre Synod. MA thesis. University of Malawi, Zomba.
- Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 2006. Regional Circle Report 2005. Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Dube, Musa W 2000. *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible*. St Louis: Chalice.
- Dube, Musa W (ed.) 2001. *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible*. Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC.
- Fiedler, Rachel NyaGondwe 2011. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989–2007): history and theology. PhD thesis. Bloemfontein, Free State University.
- Kapuma, Gertrude Aopesyaga 2002. Troubled but not destroyed: women of faith reclaim their rights, in Phiri, IA, Govinden, DB & Nadar, S (eds.), *Her-stories: hidden histories of women of faith in Africa*, 348-369. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Longwe, Hany 2008. Democratization of the Christian faith: the influence of the Baptist Doctrine of “Priesthood of All Believers” on the History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA). PhD thesis. University of Malawi, Zomba.
- Longwe, Hany 2011. *Christians by grace – Baptists by choice: a history of the Baptist Convention of Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere.
- Longwe, Molly 2006. *Growing up: a Chewa girl's initiation*. Zomba: Kachere.

¹⁸ Examples (BA degrees, 2010) are Women Ordination and Leadership in the Anglican Diocese of Southern Malawi by Medelina Chikoti; The Role of Yao Muslim Women in HIV/Aids Prevention and Care by Richard Gadama; Church-Wedded Marriages, Non-Church Marriages and Violence and HIV/AIDS in Kamwendo Area in Mchinji District. By Philonia Yambani.

¹⁹ Some examples (MA modules) are Ordination of Women in the Free Methodist Church in New York and its Impact on Malawi by Bernard Kalukusha, 2010; Experiences of Initiation Rites among Bandawe Girl Students by Wezi Gondwe, 2009; History and Charisma of the Sisters of St Theresa of the Child Jesus 1934-2009 by Jacqueline, Mpanyula, 2010; The Place and Role of Women in Chinamwali CCAP Church by Bridget Manda, 2010; and The Enhancement of Girls Education in CCAP Synod of Livingstonia by Jimmy Oswald, 2009. Some PhD modules are The Changing Role of Women in the Three Main Branches of the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement by Dan Been, 2010; and Women in Holy Ministry in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia: A Study of Perceptions by Joyce Mlenga, 2008.

- Manda, Christine 2001. A testimony against polygamy, in Oduyoye, MA & Kanyoro, M (eds.), *Talita Qumi: Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, 152-154. Accra North: Sam-Woode.
- McClung, Grand (ed.) 2006. *Azusa Street and beyond*. Gainesville: Bridge-Logos.
- Moyo, Fulata 2009. Women, sexuality envisioned as embodied interconnected spirituality and sexual education in Southern Malawi. A quest for women's sexual empowerment in the HIV/AIDS context. The case of *Kukhonzera Chinkhoswe Chachikhristu* (KCC) among Mang'anja and Yao Christians of T/A Mwambo in rural Zomba. PhD thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba & Kanyoro, Musimbi (eds.) 1992. *The will to arise: women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo 1988. Women in theological education in Malawi. *Religion in Malawi* 2, 24–28.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo 1989. A Convocation of African Women in Theology, Trinity College, Legon, Accra, Ghana 24-30th September. *Religion in Malawi* 3, 39–41.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo 1995. The struggle of women in the Church and the University of Malawi. Unpublished paper.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo 1996. Marching, suspended and atoned: Christian women in Malawi 1995, in Ross, KR (ed.), *God, people and power in Malawi: democratization in theological perspective*, 63-105. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo [1996] 2000. *Women, Presbyterianism and patriarchy: religious experiences of Chewa women in central Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo 2000. Stand up and be counted: identity, spirituality and theological education in my faith journey, in Ackermann, DM (ed.), *Claiming our footprints: South African women reflect on context, identity and spirituality*. Matieland: EFSA Institute of Theological and Interdisciplinary Research.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo & Moyo, Fulata 2005. Focus Group, Malaka-le Theologies, 14 July.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo & Nadar, Sarojini (eds.) 2005. *On being church: African women's voices and visions*. Geneva: World Council of Churches.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo & Nadar, Sarojini (eds.) 2006. *African women, religion, and health: essays in honour of Mercy Amba Ewudzi wa Oduyoye*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Ross, Kenneth R 1999. Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi 1993-1998. *Religion in Malawi* 9.