

**The contribution of Mercy Amba Oduyoye
in developing an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness
and its implications for an Anglican church in an urban London context**

Abstract

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is an association gathered to include the contribution of women in theological discourse. Mercy Amba Oduyoye is one of its key and founding members. Oduyoye is an influential voice which has considered how women's contributions to ecclesiological models is a necessary part of a redressing process of transformation to bring about healing and wholeness in and for the church. Using theological reflection as an analytic tool, this paper focuses on Oduyoye's thesis of inclusion and the hermeneutical lens of African women's experience as expressed in the hearth-hold. Oduyoye offers a practical and prophetic approach that affirms solidarity and reimagines community relationships through the hearth-hold. The hearth-hold is drawn from an African women's experience of home-making and is developed to give insight into the *oikos* - the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). The development of the church as a hearth-hold gives a picture of belonging, and this reinterpretation offers women a valued place that provides a framework for transformative inclusion. Solidarity is likewise explored as an expression of a feminist 'table principle' ecclesiology which emphasizes the necessity of women's experience, insight and contribution. This paper concludes by proposing how Oduyoye's 'two-winged' theology can be applied to a London Anglican urban context through habits that celebrate diversity in liturgy, prayer orientated to justice, preaching as dialogue in the round, and relationship-centered communal priority. Together they offer an expression of transformative inclusion as Oduyoye's contribution to an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness.

Introduction

Moving into the twenty-first century has witnessed a global trend whereby Christianity's centre of gravity has shifted to the global south. It has been in Africa and Asia where there have been the most vibrant Christian movements and church growth. In considering the theological discourses that are influencing the development of ecclesial models, theory and practice, it is worth turning to the foremost voices from the global south. Dr Mercy Amba Oduyoye is a Ghanaian theologian and is one of the founders of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle), an academic association of peers established to support and promote African women's contributions to relevant theological discourses. The Circle has been a source of insight, inspiration, and influence with Oduyoye at the centre.

By way of holding the interplay between the formulation of an ecclesiology and its interpretation into a local setting, theological reflection will be relied upon as the mode of enquiry. This is because theological reflection as a practice includes analysis and application. Therefore it is used here as it will give shape to drawing on a global perspective and locating it in a local London context. Not only is Oduyoye an influential African theologian, she is one who has boldly and tirelessly championed inclusion. Most notably, Oduyoye has championed for the inclusion of women theologians. Inclusion is an important component for understanding a comprehensive and corrective view to healing and wholeness in the church. The reference here is to understanding inclusion as access to opportunities to contribute to theological discourse. Theological education and resources are the imperative and definition of inclusion highlighted within the Circle. What Oduyoye has offered around wider themes of health, wellbeing, and healing, are explored to shape an ecclesiology of wholeness based in inclusion and solidarity.

When commenting on why women continue to go to church, be involved in, and contribute to, the life of the church, when the church is consistently a place of exclusion and 'dis-ease' for women, Oduyoye holds it is because of solidarity to Christ. Solidarity is a recurring thread that influences the ecclesial vision that is present from the beginning of the emergence of the Circle and

throughout Oduyoye's theological contributions. As such, solidarity is a key theme which is explored and considered alongside a 'table principle' ecclesiological model given by Letty Russell. Russell as a feminist ecclesialogist and Nicholas Healy as a missional ecclesialogist are introduced as conversation partners to Oduyoye in the development of an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness.

The most explicit ecclesiological metaphor Oduyoye develops is that of the hearth-hold of God. This is a nuanced African re-imagining of the *oikos*. It will be considered as it offers a helpful ecclesiological insight as it draws from an African-woman's experience of home-making. Within the hearth-hold all those who eat together around the same hearth are bonded together, whether biological family or not. The drawing of family lines is around those who eat together, share together, and are bonded in a relationship of reliance. Oduyoye calls on this as a transformative interpretation of and for the church. To contribute to the theological reflection, Nicholas Healy is also included as a conversation partner. Healy emphasizes the critical place of local discernment and practical expression that moves towards transformation as essential in any ecclesiological approach. He describes this as a practical-prophetic ecclesiology. This practical-prophetic ecclesiology is examined with Oduyoye as she develops an ecclesiological contribution grounded in realistic, concrete experience. Healy helps bring a theological framework to support the role of transformative inclusion that Oduyoye presents.

Finally, drawing together Oduyoye's contribution to developing an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness, it is applied within a local context. Healy defends that any ecclesiological model must be determined by the church's visible practice and engagement for it to be meaningful. This presents a helpful perspective because it emphasizes process over outcome; that is, analyzing what the church does and its impact as the premise for definition rather than any theoretical or conceptual models. Likewise, Russell's 'table principle' of open participative ecclesiological interpretation reimagines the church as an inclusive, communal, dynamic body. This helpfully places relationship at the centre of its ecclesiological model. Both Healy and Russell elucidate Oduyoye's perspective in developing an inclusive ecclesiology as a way to validate women's experience

in and for the church and thereby create a definition of a holistic ecclesiology. Its application is considered through the interpretation of four habits of inclusion that are offered to an Anglican church in urban London. These habits are: celebration of diversity in liturgy, justice orientated prayer, decentralizing preaching to dialogue in the round, and prioritizing relationship as the primary marker of ecclesial health. Together they present a way of expressing transformative inclusion as Oduyoye's contribution to an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness.

Experience - Noticing a deficit

Do you know us theologically?

It is hard to articulate an absence. Like the expression 'you don't know, what you don't know', if something is missing, what you can describe is its absence, but not what its presence could or should be like, because it is not there, yet. The starting observation in this instance is an absence: the absence of diverse voices in theological discourses of ecclesiology, and how these might shape the ecclesiological identity and practice for an Anglican church in urban London.

The thread of recognition begins first with the global growth of Christianity. Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim track and map Christianity as a world religion, highlighting its spread and contextualization across the world. *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction* when it was first published in 2008 was one of the first of its kind. Now in its second edition, it was re-structured and reconsidered to emphasize the spread of Christianity into Asia and Africa, and how this has shaped the growth and expression of Christianity. This global growth movement is such that the majority of Christians are now in the global south. As they note, "It is sobering for Europeans and North Americans to realize that they are a minority among the worlds' Christians and that the most vibrant recent Christian movements have emerged from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania."¹ When considering which voices are shaping ecclesiological discourse, surely those where the church is the most energetic should be prominent. However, it is exactly here where there is an absence.

¹ Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd edn. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), p. 4.

As early as 1974, John Mbiti, was calling for the critical engagement with African theologians. This challenge was not limited to African voices, but was a clarion call for the necessity of diversity within the theological academy.

“Theologians from the new (or younger) churches have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you... We know you theologically. The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically? Can you know us theologically?”²

Mbiti emphatically raises his questions in order to take seriously and include diverse perspectives and thereby develop a more universal, indeed a more whole theological discourse. Inspired by this proposition, the intention here is to explore and give prominence to a theological voice from the global south as a way of developing a more meaningful contemporary ecclesiology and then applying its insights to a local London context.

From the margins to the centre

As well as championing the necessity of including diverse theological voices, mapping the development of global Christianity also raised the importance and significance of women in this movement. Inspired by the work of Kim and Kim, Gina Zurlo, a quantitative sociologist and researcher of mission and world Christianity, identifies and focuses on women as key players in the global growth of the church. Indeed, she argues that the spread of Christianity should be recognized as a ‘women’s movement’. Zurlo goes on to present that within the church the influence and contribution of women is underestimated. As she suggests, these are the very voices which have been absent from theological discourse, but need to “move from the periphery to the centre”.³

Dana Robert, the Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, in tracking the growth and global expansion of Christianity, highlights two trends worth noting here. First, as already identified, the exponential growth

² John S. Mbiti, ‘Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church’, in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, ed. by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Paulist, 1976), pp. 6-18 (p. 16-17).

³ Gina A. Zurlo, *Women in World Christianity: Building and Sustaining a Global Movement* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2023), p. 7.

of the church in the global south, namely Latin America and Africa. She estimates that by 2025, by percentage, there will be more Christians in each, Latin America (24%) and Africa (24%) than in Europe (20%).⁴ How Africans are contributing to a developing ecclesiology is current and pertinent. Robert introduces her analytical overview by commenting that this trend beckons self-reflection as “Christianity becomes interesting as a catalyst for new identify-formation rather than a fixed institution.”⁵ In this climate, African ecclesiological understandings have a heightened imperative contribution. The second trend to highlight from *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* is the impact of women on church development. Again, as Robert summarizes, “the history of Christian mission must focus on women for the majority of Christians in the world are women. If judged by numbers or members, Christianity is predominantly a woman’s movement.”⁶ A further affirmation that if the church is to better understand and conceive of itself currently, any developing ecclesiology should include the majority voice and thereby involve contributions from women theologians. A part of the task of the theological tradition is to be confronted so that the integrity and contribution of women can become integrated into the theological reflective task.⁷

To be able to attend to diversifying the theological discourse as raised by Mbiti, and thereby begin to ‘know theologically’ one another, we turn to a theologian from the global south. Here the aim is to identify and engage a voice from a Christian movement like that highlighted by Kim and Kim where there is vibrancy within the church. One such theologian is Mercy Amba Oduyoye, as one of the founders of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle). Oduyoye is the only listed African theologian in *Twentieth Century Theologians: A New Introduction to Modern Christian Thought* - a compilation of those considered the most insightful theologians emerging from from the last

⁴ Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷ John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity Today: African Theology Today* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 51.

century.⁸ Similarly, she is selected as a crucial voice to help construct a global theology that can speak to the church worldwide⁹, and is recognized as one of the most creative and urgent theological voices¹⁰. Oduyoye is recognized as presenting a perspective and articulated theology unlike any other previously encountered.¹¹ Oduyoye's is a unique and influential voice to consider and be shaped by while developing an apposite ecclesiology.

In 1989, the Circle was gathered to provide a platform for absent African theological voices, notably women theologians. Energized by the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, Oduyoye convened the Circle, a network deliberately established to support and thereby ensure that the most marginalized voices could be heard, namely African women. "Today the Circle is one of the largest African women's networks and communities focused on religious conversation, study, and publication."¹² The Circle gave focus particularly to gender and wellness, recognizing that what women have to contribute to the theological academy is necessary for wholeness. Their absence by definition precludes any true wholeness, and as Oduyoye presents, the engagement and inclusion of the learning, insights and developments of African women theologians is itself a process of healing. As Zurlo points out, theologians like Oduyoye have influenced new kinds of theological thought which should be moving from the periphery to the centre to provide a more holistic and relevant theological perspective.¹³

Methodology

The starting experience of this theological reflection is the absence of women's theological voice from the global south particularly in discourses around

⁸ Philip Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians: a New Introduction to Modern Christian Thought* (I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), p. 11.

⁹ Jennifer M. Buck, *Reframing the House: Constructive Feminist Global Ecclesiology for the Western Evangelical Church* (Pickwick Publications, 2016), p. 83-84.

¹⁰ Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West* (Koninklijke Brill, 2003), p. 91.

¹¹ Kennedy, p. 284.

¹² Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Ecumenism, Feminism, and Communal Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), p. 66.

¹³ Zurlo, p. 6-7.

ecclesiology. It raises questions about how might this majority experience, within the core of the current global church's vitality and growth, bear influence over ecclesiological discussion in general, and how it is applied specifically in a London urban context.

The methodology that will be applied is following the Whitehead pastoral cycle as a model for theological reflection and structure for inquiry. Ecclesiology in itself is identified as a form of theological reflection, and one that should be explicitly practical and prophetic.¹⁴ This methodology follows first an initial observation and experience, as already identified. It then explores the context and parameters of reflection. This will include a literature review and setting the definitions of healing and wholeness. Likewise, it will introduce the *oikos*, the household of God as Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesian church. *Oikos* is one of the first ecclesiological descriptions given in the New Testament, and it is one Oduyoye re-imagines within her African context. Reflection is the main tool of analysis. Whereby, first, a reflection on the theme of solidarity as the active expression of unity in community is given. This is a theme that is present throughout Oduyoye's theological writing and it is considered alongside a feminist interpretation of church which similarly raises the imperative of women's participation. Then specific focus is given to Oduyoye's contribution around the hearth-hold as an insightful ecclesiological image. How both solidarity and the hearth-hold give shape to a practical-prophetic ecclesiology is developed. Finally, within the pastoral reflective cycle, what these offer as habits of transformative inclusion that could be applied to an Anglican church in urban London are outlined.

Explore - Flying with two wings

Setting the foundations

In exploring the context and parameters of this theological reflection, three parts will be considered: a literature review, identifying definitions of healing and wholeness, and offering a Biblical introduction to the *oikos*, the household of

¹⁴ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 46.

God, as presented in Ephesians. These are the primary foundations to establish the focus of this analysis.

The literature review will locate Oduyoye's ecclesiology in prominent models of missional ecclesiology. These have been crucial in the development of outward and practical expression of ecclesiological understandings. The review will also explore ecclesial interpretations around hospitality and restoration (reconciliation). In so doing, will give a focus to women and African theologians who have contributed to developing themes of wholeness.

Definitions of healing and wholeness will be drawn from Oduyoye's own writing, particularly *African Women's Theologies, Spirituality, and Healing*. However, healing, health, and well-being are themes that emerge throughout her writing. *Twentieth-Century Theologians* identifies Oduyoye as a modern influential theologian, and summarizes four critical concerns which emerge from her writing. Oduyoye's theology is described as a theology of liberation emerging from the depredations, sicknesses and crises of Africa.¹⁵ The main features of her theological thinking are: "first, captivity and oppression as they have been experienced in Africa for centuries; second, the situation and suffering of women in Africa; third, ecumenism; and fourth, theological issues of relevance internationally, discussed from an African vantage point."¹⁶ Acknowledging sickness, and identifying what will bring about well-being and health is always with the broadest understanding that physical health is inextricably linked with social, relational, natural and communal healing. Within this perspective, healing is related to ecclesiological health through a process of inclusion that brings about wholeness.

An understanding of transformative inclusion is a part of the very being of the church as offered in Paul's introduction to the household of God. Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers a radical vision of the church, the *oikos*, whereby all relationships are reconciled through Jesus, and new family bonds are possible and generated. This is gathered unity in and through Jesus, and the basis for a

¹⁵ Kennedy, p. 284.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

re-imagined understanding of household through the experience of African women.

Literature review

Oduyoye's ecclesiological emphasis involving solidarity and reimagining the hearth-hold as the household of God, helps position inclusion as a process of healing and wholeness for the church. Shaped by the image of the church as the household of God Lesslie Newbigin's *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* is foundational in introducing and developing a missional ecclesiology. Craig Van Gelder submits a pneumatic emphasis, and asserts the primary role of the church as outward looking and realized through missional activity. These themes are further developed by Nicholas Healy in his practical-prophetic model.

The Circle helps place Oduyoye as a significant theological voice and one which has contributed to the development of an African perspective on health, healing and wholeness, the focus here within the church. Other perspectives of redrawing family and household relations as a way of expressing a reformed, or indeed transformed, ecclesiology is reviewed. Both hospitality and reconciliation are seen as ways to bring healing and wholeness. First, Christine Pohl's *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, who as another women theologian, explores the place of hospitality. Emmanuel Katongole alongside Chris Rice in *Reconciling All Things* explores reconciliation as the potential to justice, peace and healing. Katongole offers insights as a priest and theologian writing from a distinctly African perspective. Hospitality and reconciliation are two examples of active stances for the church engaged in healing, but they do not specifically give attention to women's experience and particular contribution to developing a more whole ecclesiology.

Lesslie Newbigin's *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* offers a foundational contribution to modern ecclesiology. His approach asserts that the church is formed by God's action and is activated in our response to God. "It is a perspective inseparable from action, and that action must be both in the direction of mission and in that of unity, for these are but two

aspects of the one work of the Spirit.”¹⁷ This book is a formative introduction to a missional ecclesiology.

Newbigin stresses the church is a visible, earthly community. The church is a community formed by believers incorporated into Christ. They are incorporated in Christ by hearing and believing the Gospel, by sacramental participation, and by receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ This bonds believers together, thus emphasizing the relational nature of the church. The church is understood through this interconnectedness and belonging, and thereby is best understood as and through being the household of God.

The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church was written while Newbigin was the bishop in the Church of South India, and it is inspired and generated by the ecumenical work occurring at the time that was significant in shaping ecclesiological discourse. Newbigin explores what it means to be the church, drawing from an imperative of unity.¹⁹ His theology, which locates the church as a missionary community, rather than merely a doctrinal or liturgical one, shapes an ecclesiological understanding that is distinctively outward looking and orientated towards the world: “...that the Church can exist without being a mission involves a radical contradiction of the truth of the Church’s being, and that no recovery of the true wholeness of the Church’s nature is possible without a recovery of its radically missionary character.”²⁰ The church is missional in its very being and therefore this missional character must be visibly expressed and active. This is a theme that continues to be revisited, with Oduyoye and Healy, whereby the church’s identity is formed by its action and impact, and needs to be central in forming ecclesial models.

Craig Van Gelder, an American missiologist concerned with the emerging church in America in the 1990’s, continues to develop a missiological ecclesiology in *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*.

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (SCM Press Ltd., 1953), p. 23.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 201.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

However, the particular emphasis he develops is around the role and dynamism of the Holy Spirit. He gives emphasis to the church as “a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community.”²¹ Here, the church is born of the Spirit, and its activity is to participate in God’s mission in the world as energized and activated by the Spirit. The church as ‘the people of God in the world’ must reflect the missionary character of God, and in so doing identify the church as inherently missional: “It (the church) is to participate fully in the Son’s redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the distinctive people of God. With this understanding, mission shifts from naming a *function* of the church to describing its essential *nature*.”²² In shaping this ecclesiological approach he outlines three aspects of the church’s definition: what the church is - its nature; what the church does - its ministry; and how the church is to structure its work - its organization. His final summation is the nature of the church is based on God’s presence through the Spirit, from which its ministry and organization derive its character and meaning.²³

Van Gelder offers two other themes that are relevant to note. The first is within the framework of church and culture. He emphasizes that the church must be contextual, engaging with the culture it is within but without being compromised by it.²⁴ This is presented as a process of faithful contextualization that expresses a prophetic edge. Also, he suggests that there is a key relationship between theological and practical integration that must be appreciated in any ecclesiology: “The biblical story is contextualized in the life of the church...the world is able to understand the truthfulness of the gospel story by reading the story of the life of the church.”²⁵ Here the ecclesiological discourse again is highlighting that the visible expression of the church, its action, is as relevant in its understanding of itself as its prophetic presence within culture. Both themes are more fully explored in Healy’s practical-prophetic ecclesiology. Two theologians who have examined the church’s practices, its

²¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Baker Books, 2000), p. 25.

²² Ibid., p. 31.

²³ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

actions, to help identify the church's identity and as means to define its ecclesiology, are Pohl and Katongole.

Christine Pohl, a professor of Christian social ethics, offers hospitality as a neglected yet central Christian practice; an action of the church through which an ecclesiology may form. Tracing its biblical roots, historical practice, and contemporary place, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, argues for the necessity of hospitality, notably within the Western Christian tradition. It is a tradition to be reclaimed for the church to better understand and realize itself. Hospitality is presented and developed not least as welcoming strangers, creating community, and sharing resources with those in need²⁶, attributes not dissimilar to that of Oduyoye's presentation of the hearth-hold.

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition is valuable in this literature review because it offers a Christian practice that is available to women and indeed where women have been leaders. Here Pohl recalls wealthy women in the New Testament who had converted to Christianity, and as she highlights, were models of 'exemplary hospitality'.²⁷ Not only is this a Christian practice that is fully available to women, it is one where women are at the centre of its expression, shaping and development. Furthermore, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* is significant because it describes hospitality as a process where the nature of relationships which had previously been reserved for family are extended:

"Hospitality, because it was such a fundamental human practice, always included family, friends, and influential contacts. The distinctive Christian contribution was the emphasis on including the poor and neediest, the ones who could not return the favor. This focus did not diminish the value of hospitality of family and friends; rather, it broadened the practice so that the close relations formed by table fellowship and conversation could be extended to the most vulnerable."²⁸

²⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 6.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

Pohl offers that the earliest churches developed through household based hospitality. As such, the church was a new household, a renewed household of God's, whereby those who formed the church became family to one another.²⁹ Her challenge includes a recovery of the household, and the church as household, for hospitality to be reclaimed.³⁰

Turning to an African perspective with the work that Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice create together in *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*. They each write from experience within broken and divided communities. Katongole is an Ugandan catholic priest impacted by the Rwandan genocide (1994). They offer a practical approach, that is non-idealized or theoretical; its an ecclesiology that recognizes that the identity and role of the church is expressed in reconciliation.

“As we do the work of being God's people together, we begin to see ourselves as companions and fellow travelers on the journey towards God's new creation. The church is crucial to this journey, not simply because the journey requires a community to sustain it, but also because the life, ministry and practices of the community allow us to catch glimpses of that new communion into which the journey of reconciliation leads.”³¹

Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing offers a practical ecclesiology centered around reconciliation. This is reconciliation revealed and practiced in visible habits (derived from Jeremiah 29:5-7) such as listening, hospitality, and keeping house.³² Furthermore, reconciliation happens through the mundane and everyday tasks as the church is oriented towards hope.³³ Similar to Oduyoye, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* emphasizes the need for the church to recognize its brokenness and failings, which they suggest can be done through lament, and only then have its true identity realized. Katongole and Rice draw from concrete experiences and metaphors, like Hutu and Tutsi workers drinking banana beer

²⁹ Ibid., p. 41-42.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

³¹ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Inter Varsity Press, 2008), p. 109.

³² Ibid., p. 59.

³³ Ibid., p. 118.

from the same cup, by way of gaining ecclesiological insight and helping the church better understand itself.

Inclusion as healing

Oduyoye's tool was theology. She understood theology as "an expression of faith in response to experience."³⁴ Oduyoye had firsthand experience, in the community and in the church, of the detrimental effect of the exclusion of women. The exclusion of women is realized as 'dis-ease'. For Oduyoye this is a societal illness for which theology has something important and positive to contribute as remedy. This was a key motivation and contribution for Oduyoye herself.

"The strictures of a cultural-religious mindset do not always prioritize African women in the very societies and communities they build and bolster. Aware of this reality, Oduyoye decided to privilege the wellness of African women, challenge the unjust aspects of African society, and resist the colonial characteristics of the Christian church—and she did so through her theology."³⁵

By this measure, the presence of women's voices in theology itself defines an understanding of healing: the absence is a mark of disease, and by contrast, the presence of health. Here inclusion, the making right of relationships that are out of balance, is the definition of healing. Such an approach is corroborated in the examination and application of *Isirika*. In offering a feminine contribution as a complementary concept to the *Ubuntu* appreciation of the interconnection in community and individual health, Musimbi Kanyoro, a theologian and fellow founder of the Circle, offers the concept of *Isirika*. The essence of *Isirika* is to imprint upon every member of a community that they are each other's keepers, with mutual responsibility for caring for each other.³⁶ This is where health is found, both in the individual as a part of the community and vice versa. Inclusivity is identified as a trademark of *Isirika*, where everyone's common

³⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 22.

³⁵ Oredein, 'The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye', p. 60.

³⁶ Dogara Ishaya Manomi, 'Beyond *Isirika*: Problematizing and Theorizing Musimbi Kanyoro's Communal Ethics', in *African Women's Liberating Philosophies, Theologies, and Ethics*, ed. by Beatrice Okyere-Manu and Léocadie Lushombo (2024) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/4920922>> [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

humanity is recognized together, and where every idea counts.³⁷ Kanyoro gives the experience and application of the expression of *Isirika* in the context of academic discourse. Kanyoro offers that accepting every idea that serves the local community contributes to decolonizing and depatriarchalizing scholarship.³⁸ Likewise, when reflecting on the inception of the Circle, it was the shared power and collaboration that challenged the ills in the church and academia.³⁹ From its inception, the Circle, with Oduyoye as a part of it, are motivated by, interested in, and concerned for, the health of the church.⁴⁰ As Oduyoye summarizes, “God may not be ‘in the thunder’ so listen for the *thin calm whispers* (cf. 1 Kings 19:12) that are coming from African women theologians of the Circle. We are concerned for the health of the church and for religion as such.”⁴¹ Acknowledging sickness, disease, and taking collective reparative action in relationship are common themes in defining healing within an African conception.

This helps inform a comprehensive understanding of healing, one which does not limit the definition to either the individual or physical well being. This is a comprehensive understanding of healing which prioritizes wider communal relationships. It is in alignment with an African concept of health and healing where relationships both with God and within the community are central. “In African thought, an individual cannot achieve health alone, because health is embedded in cosmic relationships and can only be achieved through restoring harmony in these vital relationships. In actual fact, the sickness of an individual

³⁷ Ibid., [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

³⁸ Ibid., [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

³⁹ Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni, ‘Ethics and Values of Mercy A. Oduyoye’s Theology of Liberation’, in *African Women’s Liberating Philosophies, Theologies, and Ethics*, ed. by Beatrice Okyere-Manu and Léocadie Lushombo (2024) < <https://www.perlego.com/book/4920922> > [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

⁴⁰ Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, ‘Introduction: ‘Treading Softly but Firmly’ African Women, Religion and Health’, in *African Women, Religion, and Health Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

⁴¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘The Story of a Circle’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 53.1 (Jan 2001), 97-100 (4), doi:10.1111/j.1758-6623.2001.tb00080.x.

is an indication of a deeper communal malaise.”⁴² By this definition, health and healing must be located in the health of those who are marginalized or excluded. Chammah Kaunda and Isabel Phiri, comment on it explicitly: “health and healing has to do with growth in just social ordering, equal political participation, fair economic access, and religious inclusion.”⁴³ Furthermore, in exploring the development of an African concept of healing, it is recognized that healing has many interpretations, however, a common understanding is always that healing is perceived in a holistic sense within the restorative or recovery processes.⁴⁴ Here we can view inclusion as a restorative process of healing, namely the inclusion of women’s theological voice.

Locating healing for wholeness

There is an African saying which helps capture this dysfunctionality in the church which Oduyoye identifies. The proverb is: a bird needs two wings to fly. In reflecting on the genesis of the Circle, Oduyoye recalls a conversation with E. Bolaji Idowu where he captures the value of the contribution of women theologians. “This is a good thing that you have started, because a bird with one wing does not fly. You, the women, are growing the second wing so that the theology in Africa can fly.”⁴⁵ What emerges here is an understanding of wholeness depicted in the image of a two-winged bird. It is wholeness as recognized by what is lacking for completeness. This is a definition of wholeness that is achieved through the inclusion and participation of women in developing an ecclesiological framework. Oduyoye championed creating spaces for women who were missing in the very places that affected them.⁴⁶ As the church is populated by a majority of women, ecclesiological enquiry is one of those places

⁴² Chammah J. Kaunda and Isabel A. Phiri, ‘Healing and Health in African Christianity’, in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, Kennedy Owino and Chammah J. Kaunda (Regnum Books International, 2016), pp. 1149-1153 (p. 1149).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1150.

⁴⁴ Tapiwa Murcherera, ‘Healing in Contemporary African Christian Contexts in the Face of the HIV & AIDS Pandemic’, in *Pastoral Care, Health, Healing, and Wholeness in African Contexts*, ed. by Tapiwa N. Murcherera and Emmanuel Y. Lartey (2017) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/881671>> [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

⁴⁵ Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein, ‘Interview with Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Her Own Words’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32.2 (2016), 153-164 (160-161), doi:10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.26.

⁴⁶ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 66.

where women have been missing and need to be included. This is an understanding of wholeness that first recognizes a deficit and then responds.

In *African Women's Theologies, Spirituality and Healing* Oduyoye draws together the close association of culture and religion and their roles in women's lives, to help imagine an African theological framework of healing. Building on the work of both Kwesi Abotia Dickson and Musimbi Kanyoro, Oduyoye introduces a new term, *CuRe* (**c**ulture and **r**eligion) to inform the task of African women's theology. "This is to say our aim should be to cure the ills of the continent generated by culture and religion."⁴⁷ Oduyoye draws on the language of health and healing as a way of developing a theological framework. Here, *CuRe* has the intentional dual meaning capturing mutual understandings of offering relief from disease and extending into creating a liberative theology with the intent to cure, that is, a theology that brings healing.⁴⁸ This is healing as a remedying of dis-ease, in this instance of a warped theology due to the exclusion of women.

"The underlying and recurring theme is significant: these women (Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians) link together to heal themselves from the abusive use of culture and religion against them through communal and scholastic sharing. In their joining together they have committed to heal not only themselves but also the communities around them."⁴⁹

Oduyoye recognized that women would need a place to acknowledge and interrogate the influence and impact of culture, including religion, in women's lives. This was in fact a theological task, and although it would benefit women, by extension this would also be for the benefit of the whole church.

"Perhaps the major task in building the church in Africa is the fundamental rethinking of the basic approaches to the theology of the church, because the one consistent and persistent scandal that obscures the full symbolic

⁴⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theologies, Spirituality, and Healing: Theological Perspectives from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (Paulist Press, 2019), p. 7.

⁴⁸ Oredein, 'The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye', p. 60.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

presence of the church as the sacrament of communion between God and humanity is male predominance.”⁵⁰

Through a communal exchange they would and could create new conditions for African women’s wellness - wellness in the most comprehensive understanding. Women have theological contributions to make about the shortcomings and negative impact of culture and religion, particularly the oppressive expression of patriarchal structures and systems. In so doing, women are creating a liberative theology; it is their coming together to develop a theological voice which is curative. “Oduyoye declared that ‘the cry for salvation/liberation in Africa is primarily a cry for health and wholeness’ and this is necessary because of the brokenness of life.”⁵¹ What is offered is a theological contribution of healing which leads to wholeness, through the place, role, and contribution of women which allow for the healing of themselves and of the communities to which they belong. Elizabeth Johnson, a prominent feminist theologian, similarly proposes that women’s theological contributions not only empower women but become a force able to transform communities to “be converted toward healing and justice in the concrete.”⁵² As such women theologians hold a necessary and privileged position for the healing of the church. “African women happily disrupt the patriarchal calm in order to bring about a new way of being community and being church in the world.”⁵³ Of course this is not the inclusion at the expense of the exclusion of men. It is both men and women, in solidarity, together as collaborators. Through this view, a definition of wholeness can be understood.

“Oduyoye contends that liberation should be seen as a shared journey of men and women (collaborators), guided by the church as a source of faith, hope, and love. Her stance advocates for an understanding of humanity that fosters a ‘wholeness of community’ where both men and women (collaborators) play vital roles.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, ‘Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community’, in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women doing Theology*, ed. by Virginia M. M. Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 3-13 (p. 8).

⁵¹ Kim and Kim, p. 112.

⁵² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2007), p. 110.

⁵³ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 145.

⁵⁴ Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni, [accessed 8 Aug 2025].

Situated within an African concept of health, Oduyoye helps to shape a comprehensive definition of health and healing where relationships are at the centre. In so doing, healing is related to ecclesiological health through a process of inclusion that brings about wholeness. Experiencing the radical acceptance of inclusion is a key element to a biblical understanding of the church as the household of God.

***Oikos*: transformative inclusion**

One of the first theological images we are given of the church is within Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he introduces the idea of the household of God.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.” (Ephesians 2:19-22 NRSVA)

Paul summarizes the good news of Jesus and the relational implications as he outlines a depiction of a new society, a new humanity, a new kinship made possible with God through Jesus. What Paul describes is the *oikos*, the household of God. Within this household, it is inclusion that is not dependent on any particular ethnicity, gender or status which makes it so distinctive.⁵⁵ The overarching theme of the letter is regarding the reconciliation available in Christ. It makes clear that reconciliation has begun in Jesus and will be consummated in him; in Jesus alienation has been destroyed and reunification begun. To say these things have begun in Jesus is to say they are experienced by those united with him which leads to a powerful vision of the church. By union with Christ, the church is a family, the meeting place with God, growing into the one heavenly temple. The members of this household, those who have been brought close in kinship to one another and God, must strive to maintain that unity which witnesses God's purpose of new creative unity, harmony and peace.⁵⁶ The *oikos* of God points to the imperative of unity and inclusion within the relationships of the church. Samuel Ngewa remarks on this passage and a general view of the

⁵⁵ *Africa Study Bible* (Oasis International Limited, 2016), p. 1725.

⁵⁶ *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), p. 1223.

church in the *Africa Bible Commentary* that in the African world view unity is strength; the larger the unit, the better. This applies not only to the individual family but also to the clan and tribe: “each group traces its origins to a particular hero and is united around certain beliefs and practices. The same is true of the church.”⁵⁷ The church gains its strength in gathering around Jesus and being united together. The household of God as described in Ephesians is the place of transformative inclusion.

Reflect - Inclusion, unity and action

Ecclesiology as theological reflection

By way of reflection, the interplay between solidarity and hearth-hold will be considered, and how they may be enhanced by a practical-prophetic ecclesiology. Focusing on solidarity and hearth-hold, two concepts which are included in Oduyoye’s writing, will help develop an ecclesiological model based upon communal participation, which promotes justice, and is expressed in a practical outworking. They each are drawn upon because of how they centre on women’s experience and insight, and offer a critique, response, counter-balance to patriarchal systems and structures which have excluded women’s contributions in ecclesiological discourses. This endeavor where women are more able to critically engage, Oduyoye outlines is the way by which new structures can be created that obviate all that needs to be denounced in patriarchy.⁵⁸ Similarly, both solidarity and hearth-hold bring attention to the nature and quality of relationship in community within the church. This attention to justice and action, healing and wholeness, is affirmed both in Russell and Healy’s development of ecclesiological models. Russell introduces a participative model in the ‘round table’ principle, whereby hierarchy is dismantled, bringing equity to theological discourse. Healy’s approach to developing a meaningful ecclesiology offers that the church must be defined by what is visible, practical, and transformative. They are both included as conversations partners within the theological reflection.

⁵⁷ Tokunboh Adeyemo (general editor), *Africa Bible Commentary Carlisle* (Hippo Books, 2016), p. 1457.

⁵⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Orbis Books, 1995), p. 8.

Solidarity

Emphasizing the necessity of solidarity for redressing the problems which emerge through women being excluded in theological discourse is presented early in Oduyoye's writing. It becomes a part of how and why the Circle came to exist. This history helps understand the context within which the concept of solidarity is so important, and how those engaged in solidarity are engaged in a healing process as it brings about wholeness. This follows a similar format that Nyambura Njoroge, also a theologian in the Circle, applies. She likewise traces the Circle's history as a means of discerning distinctive collaborative models of African women theologians.⁵⁹

The Circle traces its history back to the convention of the World Council of Churches in 1975. A report of the World Council of Churches Nairobi Assembly (1975) "determined the view that justice, including gender justice, was an essential expression of unity."⁶⁰ Shining a light on the inclusion of women's experiences and voices was a wider theme that was likewise being taken up beyond the church. Redressing the impact of the exclusion of women in spheres that involved them was not unique to the church, and as such the council was not leading a particularly distinctive report. However, the interesting theme is how this report relates justice to unity in the church. Justice is expressed in unity, and unity is only valid with justice. This brings to the fore the relational tenor in that, justice and unity are not merely concepts that are thought about, they are lived out and expressed in relationship; in this instance, justice and unity as they relate to the relationship with women in the church. In capturing the necessity of attending to gender justice, Musa Dube, the Professor in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana and a member of the Circle, states: "Unless African Christianity fully investigates how gender affects its members and the structures of the African Church, then its core business of salvation, redemption, healing and deliverance from negative powers

⁵⁹ Nyambura J. Njoroge, 'A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians' in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. by Ogbu U. Kalu (Africa World Press, 2007), pp.389-407 (p. 389-390).

⁶⁰ *A Look Back: the Founding of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women*, World Council of Churches <<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/a-look-back-the-founding-of-the-ecumenical-decade-of-churches-in-solidarity-with-women>> [accessed 2 May 2025].

will not be realized by all its members.”⁶¹ Dube cites the Circle as providing an important forum and essential platform for healthy biblical scholarship, the foundation for ecclesiological discussion.⁶²

In 1976, the United Nations declared a Decade for Women to promote equal rights and opportunities for women around the world. The World Council of Churches, having seen the United Nations Decade for Women, wanted to continue the work, and have the opportunity to specifically focus on the implications for and within churches. The World Council of Churches determined its own focused decade: 1988 marked the start of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. The World Council of Churches wanted to address gender questions specific to churches, most notably around theology, tradition and culture. Through consultation, the goals of this decade were determined, including justice, peace, the integrity of creation, ending violence against women, and what is most significant here, honoring women’s contributions to theology.⁶³ What is interesting to note is the change of language within the World Council of Churches between 1975 and 1988, whereby there is a shift moving from expressions of unity to that of solidarity. Solidarity is recognized as the dynamic relational vehicle essential for justice, unity and transformation.

Oduyoye was the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches between 1987 and 1994, and was therefore a significant contributor in shaping the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Even at this point, as the decade is emerging, Oduyoye is helping to construct an ecclesiology around solidarity. This is clear when, in 1990 Oduyoye was writing a report about the inception of the decade entitled *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, where solidarity is a central reference point. Oduyoye sets out at the beginning

⁶¹ Musa W. Dube, ‘Gender and the Bible in African Christianity’, in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Dietrich Werner, Kennedy Owino and Chammah J. Kaunda (Regnum Books International, 2016), pp. 144-154 (p. 144).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁶³ ‘A Look Back’ [accessed 2 May 2025].

the hopes and aspirations of the decade, within which hold the key elements in developing an ecclesiology of solidarity, that is, unity in community and action.

“The decade is an opportunity for the churches to take stock of how woman-power functions in the church community and what women’s resources the churches must acknowledge and make use of. It is a decade during which the churches are to review how much women’s thinking and planing go into the day-to-day life and the total mission of the church. It is not a decade for research and documentation and publication only. It is a decade offered to the church to act justly towards women and to be faithful before God.”⁶⁴

Oduyoye re-emphasizes the need to move beyond thinking and theorizing, to a stance of acknowledging and valuing, of action and faithfulness. Solidarity holds together higher community relations and the actions and behaviors that affirm them.

Solidarity is given a main stage introduction when it is headlined in the World Council of Churches’ focused decade. It is interesting to note why the World Council of Churches chose to delineate its decade of commitment as being ‘in Solidarity with Women’, rather than, similarly to the the United Nations, simply declaring a commitment ‘For Women’. For Oduyoye solidarity is an essential critique. As she comments, solidarity is important because alternative concepts such as co-operation and community have not been adequate as they have not included either repentance or renewal.⁶⁵ This highlights the necessity to be moving towards transformation. Solidarity denotes both action, in that it is active in engagement that addresses and repairs what is wrong, and unity, that is expressed in the relationships lived out in community. When considering the inclusion of women’s theological voices as a process of healing, the attention solidarity provides to acknowledge the deficit caused by their exclusion is a crucial critique. Similarly, it provides the parameters for relational action.

As Oduyoye proposes, solidarity immediately moves the discussion into the Christian theological sphere. Solidarity is a core Christian relational descriptor:

⁶⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women* (World Council of Churches Publications, 1990), p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

“Solidarity belongs to the faith. We speak in terms of unity and community; we are ourselves families and communions. We believe that we belong together, that as the church we are one body and when one part suffers all suffer and the gift of each is the asset of the whole. We believe that the love of God binds us together and inspires our love for one another.”⁶⁶

In an interview reflecting on the decade, Anna Karin Hammar, who was a theologian working at the World Council of Churches at the time, was asked to comment on solidarity. “The word ‘solidarity’ was chosen because solidarity is at the heart of the gospel, Hammar said, ‘God’s solidarity with the world through Jesus Christ which forms the background to all solidarity in the world.’”⁶⁷ Within solidarity there is a deeper relational component, which is active and giving to the other; a singularity towards unity which is only formed within the collective of community relationships. This bonding, this belonging, this relational building, stems from love. Jesus’ explicit directive is for unity based in mutual love: ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ (John 13:34-35 NRSVA). Solidarity is able to harness the dynamism of unity and community.

In helping develop an African christology, Oduyoye surveyed the language of African Christian women about Jesus as a way of building “a profile of Jesus in their language”.⁶⁸ The dominant theme which emerged was Jesus who heals through liberation. Jesus is the one who has broken down the barriers we have erected between God and one another.⁶⁹ The solidarity Jesus forms with us enables solidarity with each other. “The Christ is the Reconciler calling us back to our true selves, to one another, and to God, thereby saving us from isolation and alienation which is the lack of community that is the real experience of death.”⁷⁰ Those in solidarity with one another, surrender to the other, give entirely to the other, and are bonded in action with those with whom they are in

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁷ ‘A Look Back’ [accessed 2 May 2025].

⁶⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘Jesus Christ’, in *The Strength of Her Witness*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Johnson (Orbis Books, 2016), pp. 141-161 (p. 141).

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

unity in community. This christological model of Christ as liberator is at work then through the very struggles of oppression: "It is then Christ who suffers in her (the African woman) and works in her to give birth to new and better human relationships."⁷¹ Even if this expression of relationship of solidarity is not fully realized, solidarity with Jesus is ever present, and forever offers the possibility.

"Women continue in the church in order to appropriate the healing powers of the Christ who cared so much for community that he died for it. Living in community before God keeps alive their hope that the church will become a living community of women and men relating to one another and to their Source Being."⁷²

Being in solidarity can only be expressed when justice is being promoted, served, and achieved; solidarity is coupled with justice in a way that unity alone does not elicit. Because unity is expressed in the relationships around us, it is firmly grounded in the community we are in. As such, being in solidarity requires working for the benefit of those we are connected to. Oduyoye describes it this way: "Solidarity with a human face is mutual and reciprocal. It involves elements of co-operation, rapport and sharing. It develops between and among people who are bonded in harmony. Solidarity is walking hand in hand, developing strength through unity so that common interests are protected and common aims are achieved."⁷³ She goes on to affirm, "Solidarity is not only verbal and ideological, it has to be expressed in concrete liberative acts".⁷⁴

Energized by the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, Oduyoye became one of the founders who created the Circle. This association was formed in 1989, a network deliberately established to support and thereby ensure that African women were included in theological discourses. In tracing the history of the Circle, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler ascertains that the genesis is linked to three viewpoints, but she defends the Circle's growth and development is through the commitment and solidarity of

⁷¹ Anne Nasimyu-Wasike, 'Christology and an African Woman's Experience', in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. by J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Initiatives Ltd, 1989), pp. 92-103 (p. 100).

⁷² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Orbis Books, 2004), p. 100.

⁷³ Oduyoye, 'Who Will Roll the Stone Away', p. 43.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Oduyoye.⁷⁵ “The Circle is a voluntary solidarity movement, which follows a long tradition in African societies of such organizations securing women’s participation and decision-making in clan and village, in trade and politics.”⁷⁶ Oduyoye’s development of the theme of solidarity is seen in the work of the World Council of Churches through the decade of commitment to women and then continuing in the Circle. Solidarity offers a critique whereby inclusion works for transformation, and unity in community is active; it is borne through Christ’s reconciling solidarity with the world.

It is interesting that when Oduyoye is interrogated as to why women would even continue in the church when they are excluded from participating fully, her comment is that the very presence of women in church is an expression of solidarity with Christ.

“Women’s solidarity, therefore, is with the Church as they see it through the eyes of Jesus. Women’s solidarity is with the Church that they envision Christ represents. They know the real Church and its shortcomings as well as its strengths. They remain in the Church because they are called by the Christ to do so.”⁷⁷

It is a hopeful and transformative act. Solidarity is the relational tenet at the centre of forming an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness. This is a challenge to reorient thinking so that our common union is devoid of hierarchical relations,⁷⁸ and the church is able to realize its renewal.

Table principle ecclesiology

Letty Russell’s *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* is a seminal work which develops a feminist ecclesiology of equality and inclusion. Russell was both an accomplished theologian, a long standing member of the faculty of Yale Divinity School, and an ordained pastor in the United Presbyterian Church serving in a church in East Harlem, New York. Both

⁷⁵ Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989-2007)* (Mzuni Press, 2017), p. 38-39.

⁷⁶ Pemberton, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 83.

⁷⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘Women and Ritual in Africa’, in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 9-24 (p. 23).

of these roles contribute to providing an approach to ecclesiological discourse that is grounded in experience and 'back talk', that is, giving place to theology in a different voice.⁷⁹ She describes this as a particular contribution of feminist theologians who "work with their own traditions but begin to reinterpret those traditions according to a critique of patriarchy and a constructive attempt to write theology out of a paradigm of community or shared partnership."⁸⁰ Like Oduyoye who recognizes the value and place of experience, particularly women's experience, Russell similarly integrates lived experience into theological discourse. Russell gives an ecclesiological format based on community and relationship, namely those on the margin. "Faithfulness to Christ calls us to be constantly open to those who are marginal in our own church communities and in the wider community and to ask crucial questions of faith and practice from the perspective of the margin."⁸¹ Drawing from her pastoral experience and theological acuity, she offers a vision of the church as a 'round table'. The round table as an ecclesial metaphor highlights a number of key attributes. First, it offers a critique and alternative to hierarchical and patriarchal structures; a round table offers an equal place and space to everyone where authority is shared.⁸² Furthermore, since everyone has experience of sharing around a table, it draws from a universal experience, emphasizes the role of hospitality, the place of inclusion, and the necessity of shared participation.

"The round table in itself emphasizes connection, for when we gather around we are connected, in an association or relationship with one another. Feminist ecclesiology is also about relationship. It continually asks questions about how things are connected to one another, to their context, and to justice for the oppressed."⁸³

Here there is a high priority on relationship and connection. Russell explores the holistic relational connections that are required, thereby describing a 'spirituality of connection'.⁸⁴ Although multiple connections are considered, emphasis is

⁷⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

given to relationship with those on the margin. Russell calls the church to embody solidarity with those who are the most marginalized. In this way, through its relationships, the church is always justice orientated.⁸⁵

What is particularly helpful here is Russell's introduction of theological reflection and discourse as 'going around the spiral':

"the movement of action and reflection does not simply go around the same circle. Rather, it moves to discover new clues and new questions in a continuing spiral that never comes out in exactly the same place. This is because our experience and contexts are always changing, and each time we see from a slightly different point of view or with a new set of questions. Each time, we look at our experience and context in solidarity with those on the margin".⁸⁶

Both the reflective and active stance which gives the church meaning and insight is through the relational connection of solidarity with those on the margin. As a woman theologian developing a feminist ecclesiology, foremost of those on the margin, Russell calls the church's attention to women. However, regardless of who is identified as the marginalized voice, the place of connection to the margin is through solidarity.⁸⁷

Not only does Russell offer this as a lens for understanding the church, but also as a principle for determining its health:

"The critical principle of feminist ecclesiology is a table principle. It looks for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invite them to gather round God's table of hospitality. The measure of the adequacy of the life of a church is how it is connected to those on the margin..."⁸⁸

Within this ecclesiological framework, the strength of relationship to those on the margin is the location of justice, hope, and health, and as such, the true life of the church.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 96-97.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

In conversation: Oduyoye and Russell

It is interesting that both Oduyoye and Russell associate relationship with those who are excluded or those on the margin as crucial both to understand and examine the identity of the church, as well as the location of healing and wholeness. Perhaps unsurprisingly as theologians and women, both highlight the necessity of women's contribution to ecclesiological discourse as those with valuable, indeed essential, insights from the margin. It is the theological voice of women, as in, a voice from the margin, that is able to offer a critical understanding generated through the very experience of exclusion. This is the crux of their feminist approach and the key to unlock a universal application of transformative inclusion to bring about healing and wholeness within ecclesiology.

Although both refer to the place of solidarity as the relational stance of theological integration, each offer slightly different nuanced approaches. Oduyoye calls on solidarity as a better realized interrelationship due to its inherent recognition of repentance and the possibility of transformation. Oduyoye expresses solidarity as active unity in community. Russell describes solidarity as the essential link to form connection with those on the margin. Connection with those on the margin offers a true and integrated relationship which gives meaning to the church as an evolving community called to embody Christ's presence in the world. For Russell, solidarity is presented as a paradigm of community and shared partnership.⁸⁹ However, Russell and Oduyoye together capture the dynamism of solidarity as a vehicle of ecclesial restoration, healing and wholeness.

Although Russell similarly identifies solidarity within a christology of the suffering Jesus who is aligned with all who suffer, she also presents another expression of solidarity. In what Russell describes as 'kitchen table solidarity'⁹⁰ she attempts to capture the grounded work of participatory theological discourse by relating it to a metaphor of the kitchen table. Using the the experience of Mary, Martha and Jesus (Luke 10: 38-42), solidarity is expressed through both

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 96-97.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

discipleship and service.⁹¹ Both are needed together. Discipleship and service are given as informed and dependent one on the other: sitting at Christ's feet receiving the bread of his word, and serving at Christ's table supplying the bread for food at the table. This has echoes similar to Oduyoye's conviction that solidarity can only be expressed in action and relationship, that leads towards justice.

Solidarity is a relational stance of action and unity which is a challenge to reorient thinking so that authority is shared, and there is the possibility of equal participation. It is solidarity which enables the vision of union in the household of God. "Their (African women) hope is that God will liberate the Church from gender dualism and make all real participants in this household of God."⁹²

Hearth-hold

The most explicit ecclesiological reflections Oduyoye makes is within *Introducing African Women's Theology*, whereby chapter six is solely dedicated to studies in ecclesiology. Here she references and indeed entitles the chapter, 'the household of God'. Understanding the church as the household of God is a well developed ecclesiology drawn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. At the end of chapter two in this letter Paul summarizes the good news of Jesus and its implications as he outlines the depiction of a new society, a new humanity, a new relationship made possible with God through Jesus. What Paul described is the *oikos*, the household of God: 'So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:19 NRSVA). This is such a foundational definition which places the idea of home and family at the centre. Within the household of God new relationships are possible and are formed, creating a new home. Separation between members and indeed separation from God is reconciled such that division no longer exists, and all are joined together. Spiritually formed into a new family - God's own household and home. This is a powerful image of belonging, provision, care and protection; all the qualities of home-making extended to the Ephesians and all those in the *oikos*, which is enabled through Jesus.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁹² Oduyoye, 'Introducing African Women's Theology', p. 83.

Taking the missional ecclesiological approach which emphasizes the familial bonds of faith, where the church takes form from its interconnectedness and belonging, and is in its very nature a community looking outward, Oduyoye employs a specific cultural hermeneutic of African women. “It (the ecclesiology of African women) moves from images of the Church in the New Testament, to the churches of the African women’s experience. The way women narrate their experiences of the Church can be an indication of what they understand the Church to be.”⁹³ Elizabeth Mburu offers this as a model for African hermeneutics, by moving from the known to the unknown, taking African cultures and worldviews “as bridges to promote understanding, internalization and application of the biblical text”.⁹⁴ Mburu likens this African hermeneutic as a four-legged stool, whereby parallels to the African context are held alongside the theological, literary and historical contexts.⁹⁵ Doing just that Oduyoye points to women-headed households in the Old and New Testaments, suggesting, “it is therefore, meaningful for women to see the African household as providing Africans with a model of community through which to discern the characteristics of a community under God.”⁹⁶ Using this perspective, it approaches women’s experiences of household in gaining ecclesiological insights of the church as God’s household. In commenting on the strength of the learning and contribution of the Circle, this is at the very heart. Developing a theology, an ecclesiology, without the voice of experience is incomplete: “African theology without the faith story of African women is a theology that is incomplete and contextually inept.”⁹⁷

Oduyoye begins in acknowledging that in Africa, home-making is a major part of women’s experience and as such provides a point of theological reflection and discourse on all that has to do with community, unity, participation and

⁹³ Ibid., p. 80.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Hippo Books, as an imprint of Langham Publishing, 2019), p. 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

⁹⁶ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 79.

⁹⁷ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, ‘Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle’, in *African Women, Religion, and Health Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 19-42 (p. 39).

relationships.⁹⁸ Therefore, women's home-making experience is significant and valuable in constructing an ecclesiology of household. However, as E. M. Conradie, Professor of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape, helpfully identifies, there may also be limitations as we draw from societal constructs and definitions of household.

“Like all metaphors, the notion of the ‘household of God’ has certain limitations. Since any notion of the household is necessarily a form of social construction, it can easily be employed to serve the interests of patriarchs (the proverbial paterfamilias), possessive parents, the propagation of preconceived ‘family values’, the restriction of slaves, women and children to the private sphere, or the domestication (!) of emancipatory struggles.”⁹⁹

This is even more layered when also considering the colonial and missionary projections of domestic ideals attributed to the household which have made assumptions about African women's true experience and role.¹⁰⁰ This is why Oduyoye is inspired by an African woman's re-interpretation of house-hold: the hearth-hold. She draws from the definitions of sociologist Felicia Ekejuiba. Ekejuiba offers the understanding of hearth-hold as a better description of the setting of the African family, whereby Africans are organized around the hearths of women, some of whom may be biological mothers but not necessarily.¹⁰¹ This is an important distinction to make within this context because the householder may not be the focal point of well being of that community, whereas, the hearth-holder is. Oduyoye similarly recognizes the projections and assumptions made around women's homemaking within a patriarchal community, and she firmly acknowledges the great effort and skill required.¹⁰² Oduyoye draws from Ekejuiba's definition of hearth-hold as all those who are nourished from the same fore-place, and therefore includes a woman and all her dependents whose food security she is either fully or partially responsible for, which may be those she is

⁹⁸ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women's Theology’, p. 78.

⁹⁹ Ernst M. Conradie, ‘The Whole Household of God (Oikos): Some Ecclesiological Perspectives Part 1’, *Scriptura*, 94 (2007), 1-9 (3), doi:10.7833/94-0-1431.

¹⁰⁰ Miriam Adeney, ‘Do Missions Raise or Lower the Status of Women? Conflicting Reports from Africa’, in *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Dana Robert (Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 211-221 (p. 214-215).

¹⁰¹ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women's Theology’, p. 78.

¹⁰² Oduyoye, ‘Daughters of Anowa’, p. 160.

biologically related to or not.¹⁰³ These are relationships formed through provision, care, and shared resources. Importantly women have a recognized place and contribution, and are active in promoting communal well being.

Oduyoye holds up the picture of the early church as described in the New Testament as a model of the 'hearth-hold of Jesus'. Those early followers stayed together for mutual support and encouragement, under challenging and often hostile conditions. Their interconnectedness and renewed relationships "were also beginning to transform the meaning of the traditional family and house-hold by bringing together women and men, related only through their faith in Jesus Christ".¹⁰⁴ This is inclusion, where family bonds are extended to include all those who share together. The early church had become a hearth-hold, in that they were a community that resembled and replicated the mother-child relations, and a community whose 'food security', that is, whose faith in God, was nourished by Jesus.¹⁰⁵ These renewed relationships which marked the early church were exemplified by the inclusion they displayed. The dramatic union in Christ that brings together those from diverse backgrounds together in unity, belonging, and a new kind of community is what Andrew Walls describes as 'The Ephesian Moment'. Walls was a British historian of missions, who specialized in studies around the history of the African church. He comments that as the early church grew beyond Jerusalem, the letter to Ephesians makes it clear there was to be one Christian community, and that community had become more diverse and crossed new cultures.¹⁰⁶ The epiphanic moment is recognizing and valuing diversity as a part of the church's unity. The early church had such an opportunity, and Walls suggests that such an opportunity is upon the church again. "None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ."¹⁰⁷ A hearth-hold vision of the church, as Oduyoye describes, whereby "the church is indeed a hearth-hold with God as mother, the whole earth

¹⁰³ Oduyoye, 'Introducing African Women's Theology', p. 78.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Orbis Books, 2002), p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

is the hearth and all human beings as the children of God,”¹⁰⁸ is a re-imagined vision that indeed corrects, enlarges, and focuses our understanding of the church. As Jennifer Buck, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Azusa Pacific University, defends, a hearth-hold ecclesiology as presented by Oduyoye contributes to developing a constructive global theology for the benefit of the whole church.¹⁰⁹

For Oduyoye the hearth-hold metaphor offers two important aspects which deepen a household ecclesiology. First, the hearth-hold “becomes an icon of the woman’s domain”¹¹⁰ thus redressing an imbalance as a result of the exclusion of women. Women are responsible for, keep and care for those around the hearth-hold, and with an ecclesiology of hearth-hold, women can better understand their own place, meaning, and belonging within the church. Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein, from Texas Christian University and the preeminent scholar of the theology of Oduyoye, uses the hearth-hold imagery to appreciate the church as a ‘domestic’ space, and similarly to an African hearth-hold, it is space where women must be treated as foundational.¹¹¹ In so doing, it is also an invitation for the church to re-member itself, as it comes to a better understanding of its identity, place and role. As women’s place and contribution is valued so the whole church comes to a better realization of itself. “African women’s ecclesiology invites the people - invites the church - to revisit how it treats its women, for this treatment is a quintessential reflection of its theological beliefs.”¹¹² In paying attention to what is described as the ‘underside’ of the church, beliefs and practices can be better aligned, and in so doing, the church can learn how to be itself.¹¹³ In summarizing Oduyoye’s ecclesiological stance Oredein states that African women’s experiences are not separate from the church’s reality but critically form it:

“Thus, the calls for justice, participation, and ministry that African women are claiming for themselves are not merely vested points of interest; they

¹⁰⁸ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 80.

¹⁰⁹ Buck, p. 83-84.

¹¹⁰ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 78.

¹¹¹ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 140.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

are the crux of a holistic Christian ecclesial life. These called-forth truths are the full revelation of the church. If the church does not embody these realities for itself, it fails to be itself.”¹¹⁴

Next, as Oduyoye suggests, the hearth-hold metaphor is better suited to bring in to focus the necessity of healing and wholeness within the church. Not least because women have a contribution to make.

“Women must be included in the identification of what is good news, for what harms women cannot be good news for the whole community. What brings death to women cannot be said to bring life to the community. The Church therefore misses out on its vocation when it refuses to listen and include women in its task of being in God’s mission. No health, no healing or empowerment in and by the Church is complete when women are excluded.”¹¹⁵

Furthermore, women’s experience as hearth-holders offers insights around the charisms of provision, support, and well being, that can be extended to the church. This is participation for women where there is the partnership of men and women together. As Oduyoye suggests, this is the true image of the church as all the members of the hearth-hold of Jesus have been given gifts for the building up of the community.¹¹⁶

Oduyoye draws on a reimagining of the church as a hearth-hold of God. It is the most explicit ecclesiological model she offers. Although she often comments on the nature of relationship that determines a healthy church, or the signs of health within the church, there is no one concrete image she uses. However, the development of a hearth-hold ecclesiology offers helpful insights as to what it may include. As Oredein summarizes, the inclusive recognition of the participation of all in the church, as the *oikos*, is part and parcel of a healthy ecclesiology.¹¹⁷ Oduyoye draws from an African experience of family, community and structure, deliberately calling on a reference known to and centered on women. In so doing, she locates the possibility of healing and wholeness through the radical inclusion of belonging in the church as the hearth-hold of God.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

¹¹⁵ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 87.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹⁷ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 149.

Realistic and transforming ecclesiology

Nicholas Healy in *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* brings to the fore the necessity that, no matter how the church understands itself, it can only be as meaningful as it is expressed in its practice. He suggests that the theological task is to give attention to the church's actual rather than its theoretical identity.¹¹⁸ He challenges ecclesiological models that do not consider seriously how the church lives out its conception of itself. "The identity of the concrete church is not simply given, it is constructed and ever reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church's practices, beliefs and valuations."¹¹⁹ In this, he critiques any theoretical or idealized definition of the church, rejecting concepts of an ecclesial 'blueprint'.¹²⁰ Understanding the church in universal models, encapsulated, for example in single metaphors, does not pay enough attention to the actual, realistic, and brokenness of the church.¹²¹ His proposal is an attempt to re-conceive the church not as an abstract or idealized institution but both practical, that is how the church lives out its mission in concrete and everyday real ways, as well as prophetic, such that the church is advocating for justice and liberation. "But if different perspectives on the church are necessary as well as permissible, then not only are claims for a supermodel unwarrantable, the very search for them unwarrantably contracts our ecclesiological horizons. Models should instead be used to discover and explore imaginatively the many facets of the Christian church."¹²² This he terms a practical-prophetic ecclesiology.

Healy offers a framework which emphasizes the praxis of a church that is constantly discerned and expressed, and is meaningful through its transformative influence.¹²³ He presents an ecclesiology which must be practical; that is, how the church understands and defines itself is identified and expressed by what it does. It is an ecclesiology which is concrete and not

¹¹⁸ Healy, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

idealized.¹²⁴ Similarly, for it to be meaningful, it must likewise be an ecclesiology which is prophetic - it speaks from margins, is engaged in being a transformative presence, and is actively attending to injustice. He recognizes this may come in the form of a single voice:

“Yet it may be on occasion that an individual’s contribution to the church’s witness will require her to be a prophetic thorn in its flesh. She may find herself having to challenge certain ecclesial culture patterns as embodying either hitherto unnoticed anti-Christ or presently unsuitable non-church elements...Failure to respond to such a call, if it is indeed truly such, would be a failure of discipleship. It would, furthermore, hinder the church’s task of witness by tacitly supporting a falsifying embodiment of it. Naturally, to mount such a challenge is difficult, since it may be misdirected or its motivation misunderstood. But it should not be made more difficult than it need be by an ecclesiastical culture that brooks no dissent or discussion. Such internal challenges are a part of the dramatic struggle that constitutes Christian ecclesial existence.”¹²⁵

It is hard to not, in light of this perspective, give credence to Oduyoye as a prophetic voice. Healy’s practical-prophetic ecclesiology suggests that the church gains definition by being actively engaged in identifying, being critical of, and transforming oppressive systems. As such, it is an ecclesiology that is contextualized and communally generated, one identified through shared discernment with the Holy Spirit rather than an universal blueprint.¹²⁶ This is helpful because it gives importance and place to the marginalized in a self-actualized ecclesiology; it is a format for inclusivity.

In conversation: Oduyoye and Healy

There is much Oduyoye and Healy share with regards to the concept of the identification and role of the church. They both defend that any meaningful ecclesiology must be realistic, acknowledging where there is injustice, notably oppressive structures, systems and relationships. Healy encapsulates this by recognizing the sinfulness and finitude of the church. They likewise both assert that the church, to be the church, must be active, as Oduyoye describes, in concrete liberative acts.¹²⁷ This is an ecclesiology that embraces the real

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 71-72.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

¹²⁷ Oduyoye, ‘Who Will Roll the Stone Away’, p. 48.

experience and outworking of the church's identity which must also include expressions of transformation that are visible and active. This encapsulates exactly the presence and power of inclusion that Oduyoye presents in giving primacy to solidarity, and the reimagining and validation of the hearth-hold as an image of the *oikos*.

Both also have a common affirmation of the place of inclusion, and the necessity of corporate communal discernment. Ecclesiological models are discerned in community, located in local and diverse contexts engaged in a process of complex interpretation.¹²⁸ As such, Healy suggests that ecclesiological models should be expansive, used to discover and explore imaginatively the many facets of the church.¹²⁹ Women's experience and insight is an important and valuable contribution to reveal another facet of the church. Oduyoye repeatedly calls for the church to rediscover its true self. The communal focus is a common and key theme for African women's theology¹³⁰ and one which needs to be welcome in ecclesiological discourse. African women's experiences are not separate from the church's real experience but a critical part of it;¹³¹ they are needed for the church to better understand and realize itself. In describing Oduyoye's ecclesiology, Oredein summarizes:

“Thus, the calls for justice, participation, and ministry that African women are claiming for themselves are not merely vested points of interest; they are the crux of a holistic Christian ecclesial life. These called-forth truths are the full revelation of the church. If the church does not embody these realities for itself, it fails to be itself.”¹³²

Healy helps identify Oduyoye as a prophetic voice, one to have present in theological discourse. For Healy, the struggle towards truth, that is the church's struggle towards truth, takes the form of ongoing debate.¹³³ As such, the inclusion of women in ecclesiological debate can be viewed therefore as a prophetic practice that helps bring about transformation.

¹²⁸ Healy, p. 36.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³⁰ Oredein, 'The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye', p. 150.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹³³ Healy, p. 106.

It is important that a hearth-hold reimagining is not interpreted in a fixed way, turning it into a type of 'blueprint' ecclesiology. By that, meaning that it is a conceptual or abstract and not a lived or practical model. Rather that it is a contextualized approach and thereby a dynamic expression of transformation. This helpfully leads to the application in the specific context of an Anglican London urban church.

Application - For an Anglican Urban London Church

Habits towards transformative inclusion

The Circle is an association that has been active in developing women theologians' contributions to theological discourse, including ecclesiology. African women's theological contributions are essential as they provide a distinctive experience and insight from the margin. Oduyoye as a founding member and contributor has been an influential voice shaping an ecclesiology of transformative inclusion based in solidarity. Taking her insights, they will next be considered in how they can be interpreted into habits that are applied to a local setting.

Pohl in applying hospitality as a Christian tradition offers six habits to help form a spiritual rhythm of hospitality.¹³⁴ Likewise, Katongole in reflecting on reconciliation and being re-shaped by the Bible, writes on the habits of peace that all can engage with.¹³⁵ He offers these within the greater perspective of the journey of faith about becoming 'more Christian'. "A Rwandan proverb says, 'To go fast, walk alone. To go far, walk together.' When we learn how to slow down to make room for walking together across divides, we become more Christian."¹³⁶ In considering an application here, a similar approach is taken, in that habits of transformative inclusion are offered. These can be applied within the context of an Anglican urban London church. This context is one where it is a church that has liturgically structured worship, an ethnically and culturally

¹³⁴ Pohl, p. 170-187.

¹³⁵ Katongole and Rice, p. 57-74.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

diverse congregation, and is within a local community that is economically depressed and has high population density.

Habits of inclusion are offered as a method of practicing active and inclusive ways of being church, especially when the “current iteration falls short.”¹³⁷ As such, they are given as a means of healing and a more holistic ecclesiology. Oduyoye is a model of being realistic and grounded, she is recognized as an incisive theologian, particularly in her applied expressions.¹³⁸ Therefore, in an attempt to follow her example, this application is developed around habits that champion relationship, participation, and diversity.

Celebrating diversity

There are a couple of distinctive characteristics of a hearth-hold reimagining of the household of God, one of these characteristics is around how inclusion, membership and belonging is established around those sharing in eating together. Those who eat together form the household. There is therefore a greater possibility of diversity as those who gather around the hearth are beyond immediate family. Oduyoye reimagines the hearth-hold because of its very emphasis on inclusion. Such unhindered and unlimited participation which inevitably increases diversity around the hearth-hold is central to Oduyoye’s holistic ecclesiology. The first habit of transformative inclusion is reclaiming diversity as a positive and required ecclesiological trait.

In highlighting what has motivated and shaped Oduyoye’s theology, Oredein summarizes that fractured relationships, fueled by gender misconceptions, are in fact doctrinal problems that are located in the notion of difference: “one party lords it over another with difference as a weapon of authority, deeming the other unworthy of full inclusion. In the church, difference has become the lynchpin of inequality.”¹³⁹ A habit of transformative inclusion begins with the reclaiming of difference as a gift in creation from God for the benefit of the church. In Anglicanism, liturgy serves as the primary means of

¹³⁷ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 151.

¹³⁸ Kennedy, p. 284.

¹³⁹ Oredein, ‘The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’, p. 140.

expressing the church's doctrines. Celebrating diversity is a habit to help promote equality. This habit encourages the congregation to rethink the local liturgical expressions to better reflect the value of diversity and the parameters of inclusion. The habit of celebrating diversity can be expressed through drawing from different prayers and prayer books and regularly seeking change and alternative liturgical forms such that no one form is normalized. Oduyoye challenges the church in Africa to develop a contextual theology appropriate "to a people who are living with God 'who has made all things new.'"¹⁴⁰ The ambition of a habit which celebrates diversity is to likewise affirm and express the uniqueness of the local context and God's presence within its transformation.

Justice orientated prayer

Oduyoye deliberately chose solidarity as the relational call to those in the church. This is because the active nature of solidarity first addresses what is wrong and thereby involves lament and repentance which are always preliminary to renewal. Francoise Niyonsaba in describing a case study in Rwanda, presents women as best placed in facilitating renewal. Because of their role in families and communities, as well as their experience of marginalization, women theologians have unique insight to promote justice: "the voice of women clergy plays a great role in advocating for peace and justice. In this pilgrimage of justice and peace, in order to transform people's lives, the church should hear and understand the voice of women."¹⁴¹ This habit of inclusion gives place to articulating what is wrong, drawing from those on the margin with experience of exclusion, to build a vision of renewal through justice orientated prayer.

Johnson advocates for deliberate and expansive language and imagery within theological discourse. Most significantly she challenges the church toward undervalued female symbolism. Within this feminist theological framework lies the potential for the transformation and renewal of the church:

¹⁴⁰ Oduyoye, 'Daughters of Anowa', p. 173.

¹⁴¹ Francoise Niyonsaba, 'Female Clergy in Rwanda as Agents of Changing Patriarchal Understanding in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace' in *The Africa We Pray For: On a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, ed. by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Collins Shava (World Council of Churches Publications & Globethics.net International, 2021), pp. 109-120 (p. 118).

“feminist theology listens and speaks not just about women but about the whole social-symbolic order that it observes from this liminal vantage point, questioning the rules, terms, and practices of the centre. The speech that it generates aims at resistance and transformation not only of the suffering of the margins but of the whole design.”¹⁴²

This habit recognizes the power of expansive language to express the broken reality of the church and in prayer be committed to its renewal. Through intercession, lament, and repentance, it encourages prayer that is intentionally orientated towards justice. As such, it offers the possibility of the whole worshipping community being involved and thereby being accountable. In Oduyoye’s estimation this is a requirement for justice - “Christian women in Africa seek fullness of life, but they would also hold the whole body of Christ accountable for the achievement of this goal.”¹⁴³ A habit of justice orientated prayer provides this opportunity.

Dialogue preaching

Another distinctive characteristic of a hearth-hold inspired ecclesiology is how women’s contributions are valued. Part of its strength and insight is that it is shaped by women’s experience and gives credence to women’s position. This is the backbone of Oduyoye’s theology which is so succinctly captured in the expression ‘a bird needs two wings to fly’. Including women’s contributions also helps increase awareness and cognizance of patriarchal power structures. Inclusion becomes an important representation of wholeness. When Russell calls on a metaphor to capture a ‘Feminist Interpretation of the Church’ she uses that of a round table:

“the round table has become a symbol of hospitality and a metaphor for gathering for sharing and dialogue. It speaks concretely of our experiences in coming together and connecting at home, at work, and at worship; it also points to the reality that often persons are excluded from the tables of life, both through denial of shared food and resources and through denial of shared naming and decision making for their community, nation, or world.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p. 23.

¹⁴³ Oduyoye, ‘Introducing African Women’s Theology’, p. 109.

¹⁴⁴ Russell, p. 17.

This decentralizes power and shares it around those in the round. Being in the round becomes a powerful representation of valuing the contribution and place of all gathered. For Oduyoye the imperative for any theological discourse must include women's participation.

Another habit of transformative inclusion is gathering in the round; preaching and biblical teaching, learning and reading the Bible, happen in a format where everyone is able to contribute and dialogue is the standard. For an entirely different context Healy describes a failure of witness and discipleship of the church by not developing appropriate counter-practices to oppressive systems and structures.¹⁴⁵ Dialogue preaching, as in gathering in the round so that teaching is dispersed and learning collective, could be such a 'counter-practice'. It is the exact opposite of a hierarchical presentation where one voice is valued and offers the opportunity for equal participation. This kind of habit which redresses the imbalance of exclusion is the type of practice which Oduyoye champions because it will promote wholeness.

Right-relationship first

As Oduyoye offers, if solidarity is understood as active unity in community then there is something worth capturing about the prize of relationships. This would be the church identifying its health and value around its orthopraxy above its orthodoxy; giving resources, energy, and effort to building right relationships as its primary expression of well being. Solidarity challenges the church to place relationship at the highest order, and where relationship with whoever is considered 'other' is given priority. This puts into practice Paul's encouragement to the church in Philippi.

"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:1-3 NRSVA)

Here the people and relationships in community is the very treasure of the church, its greatest 'possession', as witnessed by Lawrence, a deacon in Rome in the third Century. At the time, there was an edict empowering the treasury the

¹⁴⁵ Healy, p. 8.

right to confiscate all money and possessions from the church. When Lawrence in turn was commanded to turn over all the riches of the church and produce the church's treasures, he presented the poor and marginalized, the true riches of the church.¹⁴⁶

The final habit of transformative inclusion is the centrality of relationship, right relationship, where there is true regard and esteem of others. This is the welcome and re-welcome each week, knowing others names, and genuinely sharing peace and accord however messy at every gathering. It is supporting any action that affirms and recreates solidarity for inclusion.

Conclusion

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is an influential Ghanaian theologian who has championed inclusion and called for the reparative involvement of women in theological discourses. As a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians she has been at the front edge of how women's contributions to ecclesiological models can help the church to realistically and intrinsically become itself. Drawing from African women's experience and insights she has helped shape an African hermeneutic that is both practical and prophetic, which according to Nicholas Healy are the hallmarks of a true ecclesiological approach. The history and the landscape of development of the Circle emphasized the place of solidarity. Letty Russell highlights solidarity as the relational stance at the core of transforming feminist ecclesiology. Solidarity is an impactful concept because it relies on active unity in community, and reflects a liberation christology. Through Jesus' solidarity, with God and the world, new relationships are possible. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians draws on an ordinary metaphor to capture the unity that is possible through Christ. Paul describes the *oikos*, the household of God, where new family relations are possible. Oduyoye reimagines the hearth-hold, drawn from an African women's experience of home-making, as a way of giving insight to the *oikos*. Not only does this help women locate themselves in an ecclesiological framework, it also

¹⁴⁶ Brandon Vogt, *St. Lawrence and the True Treasures of the Church* (10 Aug 2016), *Word on Fire* < <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/st-lawrence-and-the-true-treasures-of-the-church/> > [accessed 6 Aug 2025].

values their position and contribution. This inclusion in itself offers a process of healing and wholeness as health is appreciated as attending to what is diseased. The hearth-hold gives a picture of belonging and family as centered around those who eat together. It is a picture of transformative inclusion. Transformative inclusion can be applied to a London Anglican urban church through habits that celebrate diversity in liturgy, that orientate prayer to justice, that decentralize preaching to dialogue in the round, and prioritize relationship as the primary marker of ecclesial health. These four habits offer a small reflection on how a 'two winged' theology like that contributed by Oduyoye can develop an ecclesiology of healing and wholeness for the church.

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