Globethics Repository




# African Churches And The World Council Of Churches (107)

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

| | |
|---|---|
| Item Type | Book chapter |
| Authors | Kaunda, Chammah J.;Phiri, Isabel Apawo |
| Publisher | Regnum Books International |
| Rights | With permission of the license/copyright holder |
| Download date | 2026-11-11 06:46:44 |
| Link to Item | http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166458 |

# (107) African Churches and the World Council of Churches

## Chammah J. Kaunda and Isabel Apawo Phiri

### Introduction

We consider that the time this chapter is being written to be an exceptionally favourable one when the current moderator of the World Council of Churches' (hereafter, WCC) Central Committee is from one of WCC's founding member churches in Africa – the Anglican Church of Kenya. Dr Agnes Aboum was elected by 150-member Central Committee at its 10th Assembly in Busan, South Korea, held 30th October-8th November 2013. She is the first woman moderator and first African ever to hold this position in the whole of the WCC existence.

The main object of this short chapter is to give a concise appraisal of some of the areas through which African Churches (hereafter, ACs) have engaged with WCC since its inauguration in 1948. The sections proceed by appraising WCC member churches in Africa, followed by WCC Presidents from Africa, then WCC staff from African member churches, and finally, WCC programmes initiated by ACs.

### WCC Member Churches in Africa

While at the start of the modern ecumenical movement and in the years that led to establishment of the WCC, Africa was still regarded as a 'mission field' with little or no ecclesial identity of its own,[1] it is important to emphasise that ACs have actively participated in the WCC since the inaugural assembly in Amsterdam, 1948. In his compiled volume, *A Handbook of Churches and Councils,* Huibert van Beek documents that the Church of the Province of South Africa, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the United Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, the Anglican Church of Kenya, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (Oriental) and the Anglican Church of Tanzania were among the 147 founding WCC member churches.[2]

The period between the 1950s and 1960s marked the beginning of a new phase of ACs' participation in the WCC with their entry into membership of the WCC. This was a period that marked the end of the colonial mission period and the start of the post-colonial mission era as both nations and churches we gained independence from the so-called 'mother' churches in Europe and North America. This sovereignty gave them complete autonomy to chisel their destinies and many of them applied for membership with the WCC. Even the African Initiated Churches (AICs), which were regarded as separatist or sects, applied for WCC membership. The first to apply and be accepted was the Kimbanguist Church from Democratic Republic of Congo in 1968. Van Beek gives information on 96 churches in 37 countries as being current members of the WCC at the time of his *Handbook's* publication in 2006.[3] This information, including the one on the WCC website, does not include churches that have recently been accepted into membership. For example, the Blantyre Synod of the Central Africa Presbyterian Church has been accepted and the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) re-admitted.

---

[1] WCC, 'Africa', https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa (accessed 6 November, 2015).
[2] Huibert van Beek, *A Handbook of Churches and Councils: Profiles of Ecumenical Relationships* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006).
[3] van Beek, *A Handbook of Churches and Councils*, 112- 220.

## WCC Presidents from Africa

The WCC elects regional presidents at each assembly to serve as representatives in their respective regions. The role of the president is to promote ecumenism and to interpret the work of the WCC. They also voice the concerns of the WCC's member churches in the region to the Council's leadership. These presidents also serve as members of the Central Committee, the body responsible for carrying out the policies approved by the Assembly. According to the WCC's constitution, the presidents are 'persons whose ecumenical experience and standing is widely recognized by the member churches and among the ecumenical partners of the World Council in their respective regions and ecclesial traditions'.[4] With the exception of the first two assemblies – Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1948 and Evanston, USA, 1954, during which ACs were not adequately represented, the rest of the assemblies have had a WCC president for Africa – as follows: at the New Delhi Assembly, India, 1961, Sir Francis Ibiam, an elder in the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, was called as the first WCC president for Africa. At the Uppsala Assembly, Sweden, 1968, the Rt Rev. Dr Alphaeus Hamilton Zulu, the first black bishop of the Anglican Southern Africa Diocese of Zululand and Swaziland, was elected. The Nairobi Assembly, Kenya, 1975, elected as the first African woman WCC President, Justice Annie Jiagge of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana. She was also elected as moderator (chair) of the WCC's Commission on the Programme to Combat Racism. At the Vancouver, Canada, Assembly, 1983, the Most Rev. Walter Paul Kotso Makhulu of the Church of the Province of Central Africa (Botswana) was elected as WCC Africa president. At the 7th Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 1991, Dr Aaron Tolen of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon took on the mantle. At the 8th Assembly, Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998, Dr Agnes Abuom of the Anglican Church of Kenya became the Africa president for the WCC. The Rev. Dr Simon K. Dossou of the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin was elected at 9th Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006. And at the 10th Assembly, Busan, South Korea, 2013, Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa was elected. These women and men have been instrumental in promoting and contextualising the WCC's revolutionary theological and social ethical vision of justice and equitable social order.

## WCC Staff from African Member Churches

African churches have also collaborated with WCC through individuals who have served as staff in WCC. There has been WCC staff from various member churches in Africa who have contributed to shaping the Council's global vision. Some of the African staff of the WCC are as follows:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu from the Anglican Communion of Southern Africa was appointed Vice-Director of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the WCC, at Bromley, UK, from 1972 to 1975. He was designated as Associate Director because his responsibility was specifically to fund-raise for theological education in Africa. Prof. John Mbiti, a priest from the Anglican Church Kenya, was appointed the first African Director at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at the Château de Bossey in Geneva which he served from 1974 to 1980.[5] Dr Brigalia Bam, an Anglican from South Africa, served the Council as Executive Programme Secretary for the Women's Department. Prof. John S. Pobee from the Anglican Church of Ghana was a predecessor of Archbishop Tutu as Africa Region Associate Director of TEF which has been renamed as the Programme on Theological Education (PTE) and later became the executive director of the Theological and Ministerial Formation Programme of the WCC from

[4] WCC, 'Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches (Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006): Constitution': www.oikoumene.org/en/resources (accessed 6 November, 2015).
[5] Jacob K. Olupona, 'A Biographical Sketch', in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti,* Jacob Olupona and Sulayman Nyang (eds.), (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 1-10.

1992 until 1998.[6] Prof. Mercy Oduyoye, a Methodist theologian from Ghana, was the first African to become Deputy General Secretary of WCC in 1989. The Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia from the Methodist Church in Kenya was first appointed as Executive Secretary for Urban Rural Mission of WCC. In 2003, Kobia served as director and special representative for Africa of WCC. He was elected as the first African General Secretary of WCC in August 2003, and held office from 2004 to 2009.

Mr William Temu, a Roman Catholic from Tanzania, served as Africa Desk then Director of Management. Evelyn Appiah (Ghana) was Executive Secretary of the Stream of Lay Participation towards Inclusive Community. Rev. Fr Kwame Labi from Ghana was WCC programme executive for Urban and Rural Mission. Dr Agnes Abuom, an Anglican from Kenya, was in WCC youth education. Mr Melaku Kifle, Ethiopian Orthodox, was Executive Secretary – Refugees Affairs. The Rev. Clement Janda (Sudan) worked in WCC's international affairs department. Mr Richard Murigande (Rwanda) was Executive Secretary – Africa Desk. The Rev. Dr André Karamaga from the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda served as the African Vice-President of the WCC and later led the remobilisation of the Christian community in Rwanda after the tragic genocide in 1994; Dr Rogate Mshana, a Lutheran from Tanzania, was Programme Executive, Economic Justice, then for a while Director – Justice, Diakonia and Responsibility for Creation Programme. Dr Nigussu Legesse, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was Programme Executive in charge of African relations and was responsible for South Sudan. Mrs Sydia Nduna, an Anglican from Zambia, was WCC Programme Executive for Migration and Social Justice. Dr Fulata Lusungu Mbano-Moyo, a Presbyterian from Malawi, is Programme Executive – Women in Church and Society (its name was changed to Just Community of Women), while Ms Semegnish Asfaw Grosjean of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is WCC's Programme Executive for International Affairs. Dr Sue Parry, a Baptist from Zimbabwe, is Consultant – Health and Healing. Dr Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué, a Togolese/German professor of Ecumenical Social Ethics and former dean of the Ecumenical Institute of WCC, currently serves as the Programme Co-ordinator of Ecumenical Theological Education. The Rev. Fr Dr Lawrence Lwuamadi, a Roman Catholic priest from Nigeria, is a professor of Ecumenical Biblical Hermeneutics at the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC. Prof. Paul Isaak from the Lutheran Church of Namibia served as professor of ecumenical missiology from 2007 to 2012 at the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC. Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Presbyterian from Malawi, was appointed as WCC Associate General Secretary for Public Witness and Diakonia in 2012. Ms Lona Wilson Lupai, from South Sudan, is one of the longest-serving programme assistants.

## WCC Programmes Initiated by the ACs

The WCC, through the Assembly mandate that it has been receiving from the members churches in Africa, has continued to take initiatives in developing programmes. There have been a number of WCC programme initiatives in Africa, but here we aim to give only a concise appraisal of some of these programmes.

### The Programme to Combat Racism – PCR

In the 1960s, the WCC first general secretary, Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, initiated a conversation that apartheid should be regarded as a heresy. At the Council's 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, 1968, many delegates from global South member churches demanded that the WCC should give priority to the

[6] For a detailed discussion on the contributions of Tutu, Pobee and Njoroge to the development of ecumenical theological education in Africa, see Chammah J. Kaunda, 'Imagining a Just and Equitable African Christian Community: A Critical Analysis of the Contribution of Theological Education Fund/Ecumenical Theological Education (1910–2012).' Doctoral thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013.

elimination of institutionalized racism. This resulted in the creation of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) which was launched in 1969 in response to the Uppsala mandate. In the 1970s and 1980s, PCR played a controversial role in international debate about white minority rule in South Africa. The WCC also set up a special fund, which was given to racially oppressed groups in order to strengthen their organizational capability. The programme also confronted WCC member churches in South Africa for contributing to the perpetuation of institutionalised racism through their own policies. This resulted in some churches globally relinquishing membership with WCC because they felt the Council was supporting terrorists – the Africa National Congress (ANC). Yet the contribution that the programme made was enormous and even international organisations and politicians in South Africa have recognised WCC for its contribution to end apartheid there.

### The Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA)[7]

The EHAIA is a WCC programme which started in 2002 in response to a request by the WCC member Churches in Africa with other ecumenical partners. They requested the Council to join them in fighting the HIV pandemic in Africa. The programme has been promoting HIV competence among churches, and calls for theological institutions to include HIV in their curricula. It has also been working to deal with the core religious and cultural issues that contribute to the pandemic. At the 10th Assembly in Busan, 2013, EHAIA was given a mandate to expand beyond Africa and become active internationally, sharing its African experiences and expertise.

In 2012, the EHAIA reflected on its impact and demonstrated how many churches in Africa have become 'HIV-competent' in that they have started expressing attitudes that are more accommodating to HIV-positive people and are involved in the fight against HIV. It was reported that many church leaders have been attending EHAIA workshops and many theological institutions have now integrated HIV into their curricula due to EHAIA's initiatives. There is also an impressive and voluminous literature which has been produced on theological, religious and cultural perspectives on HIV and gender.

The EHAIA has also contributed to breaking some African taboos on sexuality and gender within both church and society. The contextual Bible studies methodological approach has been adopted and has enabled the EHAIA staff to bring out new perspectives on issues of gender and HIV.

### The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN)

The WCC has a long history of involvement with people with disability which goes back to 1971 when the Commission on Faith and Order acknowledged that the unity of the church cannot be achieved without inclusion of persons with disabilities. The 5th Assembly, Nairobi, Kenya, 1975, issued a statement on 'The Handicapped and the Wholeness of the Family of God' which affirmed that 'the church's unity includes both the "disabled" and the "abled"'.[8] The 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998, became a springboard for the creation of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN). EDAN is based in Nairobi, Kenya, under the leadership of Dr Samuel Kabue as its Programme Executive. The main goal of EDAN has been that of advocacy. It advocates 'the inclusion, participation and active involvement of persons with disabilities in sphere of the church and society'.[9] The programme is hosted by the All Africa

[7] For a detailed discussion, see WCC, 'Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA)', 2015: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/ehaia (accessed 7 November, 2015).
[8] A detailed history of EDAN is given in WCC, 'WCC Work on Persons with Disabilities: History': www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist.html (accessed 6 November, 15).
[9] For more information, see EDAN, 'Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN)', (2015): www.edan-wcc.org (accessed 6 November, 15).

Conference of Churches (AACC) but functions with an international ethos through volunteer co-ordinators in all regions where the WCC operates.

### The Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network (EPN)

The Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network (EPN) was established by the WCC and now operates independently in Nairobi, Kenya. The history of EPN dates back to 1981 when the Christian Medical Commission (CMC) of the WCC decided to provide advice and consultations on pharmaceutical issues in the health programmes of churches in Africa. CMC, with the support of a steering committee called Pharmaceutical Advisory Group (PAG), organised a consultation in Geneva to discuss issues related to pharmaceutical service delivery in Africa. They appointed a pharmaceutical adviser who provided technical assistance to the churches on medicine management and the rational use of medicines in different pharmaceutical programmes. The Pharmaceutical Adviser was finally relocated to Nairobi in 1997, and the church-based organizations that received support became a network. This resulted in the creation of EPN which has over eighty members from over thirty countries around the world, and was registered as a non-government organization in Kenya in 2004. The current Executive Director of EPN is Dr Mirfin Mpundu. EPN strengthens church health systems by focusing on promoting access to and the rational use of medicines, HIV and AIDS care and treatment, the professionalization of pharmaceutical services and sharing information.[10]

### Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE)

The WCC initiative in theological education in Africa cannot be over-emphasized. Since the inception of the Theological Education Fund, which was started by the International Missionary Council (IMC) and its successors, the Programme on Theological Education (PTE) and the Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE), African Christianity has benefited from this relationship with the renewal and reformation of theological curricula, scholarships for staff development and the production of theological literature for theological education and the church.

First, the programme gave an opportunity for African scholars/leaders who worked as staff, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Prof. John Pobee and Dr Nyambura Njoroge, to develop into global ecumenical voices. It also provided a platform for a South and North theological dialogue to which African scholars contributed African perspectives on theological education and theological thinking. This needs to be strengthened.

Second, the programme exposed African scholars to new trends in global Christianity which enabled them to add their own theological voice in the global ecumenical family. It also enabled African theological institutions to rethink their theological curricula. In early 2002, the ETE called for integrating and mainstreaming HIV and gender in theological curricula; this has helped most institutions to undergo transformation and remain up-to-date in their theological educational philosophies.

Third, the ecumenical scholarship fund on the African continent has helped many African theologians to become what they are today. The programme supported the theological education of renowned African theologians on the continent such as Isabel Apawo Phiri, Musa Dube, Philomena Mwaura, Fulata Mbano-Moyo, Ezra Chitando and many others who have made huge contributions to the ecumenical movement, theological education and African Christianity generally. The documentation of the impact of African scholars who have been supported through ecumenical scholarship remains to be done.

[10] For more information, see, ENP, 'History', (2015): www.epnetwork.org/en/about-us-5 (accessed 6 November, 15).

Fourth, through ecumenical scholarships, African theologians have been able to produce literature for the church and theological education on current issues such justice and peace, poverty, the economy, education, gender, climate change, migration and HIV, and give a unique African theological voice in ecumenical theological debates round the world. These works have begun to influence the way theological education is being done in Africa by encouraging theological institutions to bring current contextual issues to the forefront in the way theological students are equipped.

## Conclusion

The argument has been put forward that the presence and participation of ACs in the WCC has contributed to the paradigm shift in the Council's social thought as oriented to reconceptualise 'the programmes dealing with development, social justice, racism and conflict resolution, but also evangelism, theological education, formation of the laity etc.'[11] We submit that most of the areas mentioned remain in need of more empirical research in order to glean insights into the impact the WCC has made on African Christianity through engagement with African churches.

## Bibliography

'Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN).' www.edan-wcc.org (2015), (accessed 6 November, 2015).

Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network, 'History.' www.epnetwork.org/en/about-us-5 (2015), (accessed 6 November, 2015).

Kaunda, Chammah J., 'Imagining a Just and Equitable African Christian Community: A Critical Analysis of the Contribution of Theological Education Fund/Ecumenical Theological Education (1910-2012).' Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013.

Oduyoye, Mercy A, 'Africa', in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1968 to 2000*, Volume 3, edited by John Briggs, Mercy Oduyoye and Georges Tsetsis, 469-93. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004.

Olupona, Jacob K., 'A Biographical Sketch', in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, edited by Jacob Olupona and Sulayman Nyang, 1-10. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993.

van Beek, Huibert, *A Handbook of Churches and Councils: Profiles of Ecumenical Relationships.* Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006.

WCC, 'Africa.' https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa (accessed 6 November, 2015).

WCC, 'Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches (as amended by the 9th Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006).' www.oikoumene.org/en/resources (accessed 6 November, 2015).

WCC, 'Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA).' https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/ehaia (2015), (accessed 7 November, 2015).

WCC, 'WCC Work on Persons with Disabilities: History.' www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist.html (accessed 6 November, 2015).

[11] WCC, 'Africa'.