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A Place at the Table: African Women Writing Theology

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Let me invite you into the world of women in theological education in Africa. I remember a conversation with a female student in Mozambique. She told me that at first, she did not even know that women were allowed to study theology. She only found out when a friend invited her to a graduation ceremony and she saw a woman graduating. The next day she enrolled immediately. If you never see a woman in a particular role, then, of course, you do not know that it is possible. Today, women are increasingly visible among theology students and occupy administrative and service roles at theological institutions in Africa. Yet their numbers decrease substantially at the faculty level and fall even further in leadership roles. An ACTEA (Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa) survey conducted in 2023 found an 80/20 split between men and women in theological faculty positions. Increasingly, however, another question has emerged. It is one thing for women to study and teach theology, but who gets to write theology? Whose voices become part of the scholarly conversation?

I often think of theology as a bird that needs two wings to fly. One wing is the voices and perspectives of men; the other is those of women. When women are largely absent from the conversation, theology is attempting to fly on one wing – addressing questions and issues that only half the church is raising. How much richer might our theological reflections become if the whole church were able to contribute?

These were the questions and concerns that called ACTEA for Women into being in 2023. We set out with a volunteer team of four senior female scholars from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa with the explicit aim of developing an

initiative that would strengthen female scholars and bring them together across the continent. The latter was particularly close to our hearts. During an online workshop for female faculty, about 75 women from across Africa had gathered and about fifteen minutes into the first session, there was a bit of a pause and suddenly we could hear someone sobbing. The facilitator asked if the woman could identify herself (with large Zoom gatherings it is often difficult to spot just one person) and share what was going on. She explained that she was the only woman at her institution, and she had never seen so many other women in theological education gathered. She just could not hold back her emotions. The encouragement of discovering that she was not alone was overwhelming. This was a huge motivator for us to start thinking long-term about how to support female faculty and bring them together for mentoring and networking.

This is exactly what ACTEA for Women has sought to do. Monthly webinars mostly led by African female scholars provide opportunities for networking and fellowship, while the ACTEA mentoring programme aims to walk alongside female scholars on a more personal and regular basis. It was with the same desire for African women to not only participate in the life of theological learning, but to also have their voices heard in its conversations that our academic writing workshop took place in Nairobi in July 2025.

Over the course of the week, we explored the academic publishing process from a variety of angles, the practical steps involved in developing a journal article to journal and book publishing. Some sessions went deeper into the particular experience of writing as an emerging African woman theologian. We wrestled with cultural difference in academic writing, explored how to construct and support an argument, and practised giving and receiving peer review. Just as importantly, the programme created space for personal supervision, allowing participants to work on their own writing with experienced scholars. As with all our gatherings, worship, devotions, meals, and time together were woven into the programme. The aim was not simply to teach women how to publish an academic article, but to create a community in which these women could begin to see themselves as scholars with something worth contributing to the wider theological conversation.

The articles in this special issue are some of the fruits of that week, but the journey from workshop to publication did not end when we left Nairobi. We are particularly grateful to Dr Ryan Faber, editor of the *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* (ATJCS), for the time, encouragement, and careful editorial work he has invested in walking with the authors through the process. His commitment has helped bring the vision behind the workshop to fruition. Of the 41 participants, ten are published in this special issue while others have gone on to publish in other academic settings and journals. For some, publication has not been the outcome, whether by choice or through the review process. Yet each of these different paths was part of a larger purpose: to strengthen women as scholars, develop their confidence and voice as writers, and encourage their continued participation in African theological scholarship.

Our vision for African women in theological education is to see their stories of lament become stories of leadership and scholarship. It is to see stories marked by frustration and exclusion become starting points for new collaborations, innovations, and actions that can help transform institutions and cultures that, intentionally or unintentionally, have not made room for women's voices. Through ACTEA for Women, we hope to see women flourish and reach their God-given potential in African theological institutions for the benefit not only of the women themselves or the institutions in which they serve, but ultimately of the African Church. It is our desire that the scholarship represented in this issue will encourage other women to see new possibilities for themselves.

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ADDITIONAL EDITORIAL NOTE

In her guest editorial, Dr Schafroth notes that the articles in the special issue were begun at the ACTEA for Women writers workshop in Nairobi. The workshop helped the writers develop their craft and introduced them to the publication process. Some, but not all, of the 41 workshop participants submitted their articles to ATJCS. All of the articles underwent the journal's standard double blind peer review process. In the end, the following articles were accepted for publication. Careful readers may notice a deviation from ATJCS standard reference style for this special issue. ACTEA for Women adopted Langham Publishing's style guide for its writers' workshop, and ATJCS agreed to follow that style guide for this issue. ATJCS thanks ACTEA, ACTEA for Women, and Dr Schafroth for the opportunity to partner together for this special issue and to contribute to the continuing empowerment of women's voices in the African theological academy.

Ryan Faber, PhD
Editor, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*