



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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**Transforming Disciples, Transforming the Future: ^(i.)
Young African Women and the Search for a Liberated Future**

**Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda^(ii.) (PhD UKZN in Gender and Religion)
is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal**

The World Council of Churches leadership, members and staff,

The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism,

Distinguished guests,

Sisters and brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

I am honored to be invited as keynote speaker for this ecumenical gathering especially as it is on international women's day and also to represent the young African women's voice that interrogates the conference theme "*Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship*". I commend the organizers of this event and in true African spirit (excuse the pun), I welcome each one of you to Africa *karibu sana!* You are truly welcome!

Storytelling has always been at the core of African women theologians' thinking as an approach to critically engage with our African realities. Stories are the key elements that constitute the oral text for so called (history) or rather (herstory)? Allow me to demonstrate the importance of storytelling as a relevant missiological lens by sharing a brief personal narrative in order to critically engage with the theme of our conference.

I belong to the Pentecostal family but I am more than that. I am young, and an African woman but I am more than that. I have a story that has formed who I am and how I come to the Christian faith, a story that forms my identity. I don't carry one identity but many. I was raised in the context of a family headed by a single parent. My mother, who was a nurse, "called deep on her courage" and divorced my father at the age of 33. My father left her with the huge responsibility of raising four small children. She was a member of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) which is the single largest protestant church in Zambia next only to the Catholic Church. During my high school days, I was introduced to Pentecostalism. Due to its vibrancy, many young people were attracted to this form of spirituality and I was among those who, as it were, was "blown away" by Pentecostal Spirituality. However, my inquisitive, question asking, faith seeking understanding disposition continued to be ecumenical in nature. During the same period of my faith development, tragedy struck when my mother discovered that she had full blown AIDS. In her search for healing and wellness she navigated between the UCZ, the Pentecostal Church and African Traditional Spirituality, demonstrating the ecumenical and multi-faith perspective of her belief. My mother tried to find meaning and purpose of life from African Traditional Spirituality and Pentecostalism when she faced her struggles¹ of life. She died at the age of 46, and was put to rest on the day I wrote my first exam paper for my final year in high school. I came out of the exam room and headed for the graveyard. We (my sisters and I) transitioned from a female (single mother) headed home to a female teenager headed home where I was the one taking care of my two sisters at the age of 17. I became a pre-school teacher after high school and because I was not a trained teacher, I only earned the

equivalent of 100 dollars a month to care for the family. I had to mature swiftly because I needed to think as an adult even though I was only a teenager.

Indeed as Brene Brown has maintained, ‘Stories are data with soul’.² I will use my story as a lens through which to interpret African women’s experiences especially with regard to the theme of our conference. My story is not just a story of struggles, it is also a story of hope and is not unique to me. I am certain that the story is common among many young African women and their experiences might be even more significant than mine. I draw on the three constitutive marks of this World Mission Conference, which are:

1. It is ecumenical;
2. It features young leaders;
3. And it is a conference that is being held within an African context, the primary setting for ecumenical discourse.

These three features at their best embody the identity of the African environment and its peoples. Africans are indeed ecumenical by nature, as we float in our indigenous/traditional, Islamic and Christian worldviews easily in order to find meaning in life and in death. My story therefore illustrates how I am formed by the missionary founded UCZ, the Pentecostal ecclesial tradition as well as the African Traditional Religious worldview to become what can be truly described as an ecumenical African woman.

My personal story reflects some of the critical aspects of understanding the contemporary African feminist missiological context. The intersections in my story embody stories within that one story. The transitions from being raised in a family headed by a single mother to a female teenager headed household. From caring for an ailing mother failed by the health care services of the State and whom my sisters and I had to regularly bathe³ and feed when we were only teenagers and finally to dealing with the excruciating reality of the death of a beloved mother. It is these turns in my story that I will interrogate as potent missional signposts to engage in fashioning an African woman’s perspective on transforming discipleship. Conversion and social/economic transformation are vital in order to realize transforming discipleship for young, African women. I must admit not much has changed for many African women since my mother’s departure. The contemporary young African woman may currently have more opportunities to serve in the public sphere but gaps still remain in our male dominated society with men occupying many strategic positions; dare I say, even within ecclesiastical circles there remains a male prerogative because political and religious leaders are more concerned with their personal needs.

It is estimated that 83% of women globally are affiliated to a faith group because faith plays a crucial role in women’s lives⁴. If the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is at work in a world full of injustice and inequality, then one must ask questions concerning how the mission of God is practised and what it hopes to achieve. If “fullness of life for all” constitutes the ultimate goal of the mission of God then according to the WCC “churches everywhere (must...) walk together, to view their common life, their journey of faith, as a part of the

pilgrimage of justice and peace, and to join together with others in celebrating life and in concrete steps toward transforming injustices and violence.^{5b} This is an invitation for people, especially African women who live on the margins, who suffer inequality, exploitation and exclusion to journey as partners in mission seeking God's promised gift of fullness of life. This presentation therefore postulates that gender inequality within the African context constitutes an urgent missiological issue and concern because it denies a significant part of God's creation, "life in all its fullness".

This commission of engaging in a missiological task of discerning how, when and where God was at work in the lived experiences of a young divorced woman, teenage girls caring for their ailing mother or a teenager heading a home and grappling with how she will gain entry into university is vital. The missional church is therefore one that is called to act in a radical way in facilitating the social, economic empowerment of women as an extension of its praxis of transforming discipleship. Let me recall at this stage another incident during the time my mother was critically ill. A week before my mother died, I bought an intravenous drip to use in giving her the necessary medicine to keep her alive. However, as I was too afraid to administer that, it was my younger sister who proved to be braver as somehow she managed to do it⁶. My mother was cared for at home by her daughters because we could not afford the cost of getting hospital care. Quality healthcare in my country is commodified and available only to those able to afford it. Her death in her bedroom led me to realize a missiological understanding that the state and the church falling short in their strategy of providing good quality healthcare for all as central in their priorities, had failed my family and many other families that lived on the margins. Both the state and church focused on meeting inner-institutional maintenance needs rather than focusing on the wellbeing of others. The church, especially within the African context, has to serve as a missional resource for all people that live on the margins of their society, who are seeking to overcome forces that bequeath death. The kind of resistance needed in the struggle against the life denying forces requires that the followers of Jesus Christ are filled with the life giving Spirit of God that alone can equip people with the necessary resources for transformative discipleship. Through a missional process of radical missional formation, disciples are formed through a process of belonging, believing, becoming and participating in order to live out the mission of God as demonstrated through Christ's mission in the church.

David Bosch⁷ the South-African missiologist postulated in the 1990s that transforming mission as the framework through which the church engages in mission, should be done from the margins. As a teenager caring for my sisters, I often turned to the church in spite of all her inherent missional contradictions for support when I "hit rock bottom" and there was nowhere else to turn for help. To actively participate in the life of the church as a double orphaned girl, trying to think through daily what my sisters and I would eat, always brought me to tears and led me to cry out to my mother who could no longer respond and then only after that to God! Bosch's missional perspectives concur with Paulo Freire's (1969), the Brazilian philosopher and educator, who in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* called into question the model of

education used to conscientize the public. Freire's perspectives also speak aptly to the reality of the missiological context that African women experience in their quest for authentic changes in their lives within the church and society. The way to achieve this transformative discipleship must begin with understanding the daily realities that shape the lives of people in their context because transformation does not happen in a vacuum. The church has an important role to play in this process of facilitating transforming discipleship formation by emancipating itself from the socially constructed patriarchal barriers that are intentionally and unintentionally constructed to limit African women's participation in the missional mandate of the church and nation. However, the Achilles' heel that hinders radical transformative discipleship is linked to the exercising of power that restricts full participation of African women to work as mutual partners in church and society.

Transforming discipleship begins with a missional community, which embodies a community of faith that allows all to belong, believe and become in order to fully participate. The teaching and learning process is never neutral, therefore, if the church seeks transforming discipleship for all, then for African women, missional engagement that is consistent with the Spirit of Life must embrace all aspects of life in order to respond to the felt needs of people, both physical and spiritual.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda theme "*Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*", or Agenda 2030, have also identified gender equality as a global priority. The SDGs assume that through gender equality genuine transformative change can be achieved for girls, but only if they are consulted and their priorities and needs are taken into account. Therefore, young women and girls should be viewed not as beneficiaries of change but as agents of change and their inclusion in the implementation of the SDGs is crucial. It is therefore important for the missional church that takes seriously its mandate of transformative discipleship to listen to the cries of young African women in their quest for fullness of life.

The Conference theme "*Moving in the Spirit – Called to Transforming Discipleship*" speaks poignantly to the African context and the urgent needs of women to experience life giving transformation in church and society. Their quest is for justice and peace and this journey towards life necessitates achieving transforming discipleship by all followers of Jesus but specifically among ecclesial leadership. This model of discipleship necessitates leaders who are competent, committed, compassionate and consistent in their following of Jesus who welcomes all and "leaves no one behind"⁸ and this in practice means that "no women must be left behind".⁹

The slogan of the SDGs "*leave no one behind*", which also connects well with the WCC's 2013 Mission Statement, "*Together Towards Life - Mission and Evangelism In Changing Landscapes*" affirms "Fullness of Life For All"¹⁰. Transforming discipleship therefore, means moving (journeying/accompanying) together as a

reciprocal community of women and men working together for the common good. As a 17-year-old, African girl earning an equivalent of US\$100 a month, heading a home struggling with poverty, watching friends enrolled in universities while my future dreams became dim, transforming discipleship then meant embodying the hope that God's purpose for those who live on the margins would be fulfilled. I wrestled with prayers that seemed to go unanswered. I struggled with understanding how God's life-giving Spirit would guide my path into an unknown future. Facing the uncertainty of the future the faith in a God of Life is what kept me stronger. There is a girl like myself out there in this confusing and frustrating world seeking for this God of Life that offers a fresh start, a second chance and a new beginning.

The ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace invites the disciples to journey with those who have been at the receiving end of life denying systems of marginalization, oppression and exclusion in church and society, and this includes women – African women. Where do we search for stories of hope? Where do we look for African women with stories of hope? Is it possible to find women who are bench markers? We need women who show that Africa and her peoples embody the stories of resilience. Africans out of their experience of many struggles have learned how never to give up. In the darkest night they agonize and wait patiently for the morning light, always like a phoenix rising out of ashes. The stories of hope from African women such as Advocate Thuli Madonsela, the former South African public protector speaks volumes to the resiliency of African women. During her time in office as the Public Protector she spoke truth to power and called for transparency and accountability to rogue political powers. But there are many other stories of women in every African village who have risen out of ashes inflicted by state and religious systems of oppression and have made it against all odds. In our own ecumenical community gathered here, we have living examples of African women like our very own Mama Isabel Phiri the Deputy General Secretary of WCC. We can glean stories of hope from Mama Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the current Moderator of the WCC Central Committee, Mama Agnes Abuom to inspire hope to young African women. In many other international areas of service in the fields of entertainment, education and sports, young African women are demonstrating their capacity to overcome adversity and create opportunities for enterprising success. All of these stories of hope and countless others should be gathered and put into creative but effective media to share with the diverse community of young African women. It is through the access to such hopeful stories that transforming discipleship is formed. African women experience perpetual struggle with poverty, gender discrimination and multiple religious identity as they seek for their felt needs to be met. The paradox with my Pentecostal ecclesial identity is that my tertiary theological education happened within ecumenical institutions; that is, being mentored by scholars from many different ecclesial traditions. This is also the experience of many young African people. We are formed in an environment of unity in diversity. This is our experience of the missional model of discipleship formation, the journey happens with others. We accompany each other along the way, learning from each other in order that we share freely God's gifts for the common good of all. This means that the ecumenical journeying of moving in the Spirit must be accompanied with an intentional agenda of

transforming discipleship and meeting the needs of those in need. If indeed transformative discipleship is at the heart of mission in Christ's way, then following in his steps necessitates integration of spiritual transformation with social, economic and political transformation and action that responds positively to the felt needs of people.

In conclusion, my story is not unique but this and many stories of African women are “stories with soul,” such stories “put a human face” to the struggles that we often just see on TV. Hearing stories from real people who have experienced these struggles I believe is what Brene Brown called “data with soul”. As a young, African woman who was raised by a single mother my future was bleak and uncertain, however, I have been formed by the grace of God and by ‘moving in the Spirit’ through the changing scenes of life’s diverse experiences into a transformed/transforming disciple. My ecumenical identity constitutes a meeting point of discourses and competing global identities: I am a hybrid. I negotiate both global and local constructions of an African woman. Dare I to say that human beings are ecumenical spaces of various discourses? Discipleship occasionally should be about listening to stories because the narrator is not just a storyteller; she is an active participant who has been constructed by the story. The listener is also not passive; the listener critically engages with the story in unspoken words as they reflect on their own personal story through the told story.

The signposts I have stated above show that African women are vulnerable to much more than what is articulated even in this presentation. My presentation was not meant to provide answers to this provocative conference theme, rather my desire was to provoke, to cajole, to urge a rethinking. Therefore, I conclude with some questions that I hope will continue to facilitate further reflections by this conference:

1. In what way can transforming discipleship facilitate the church to engage in radical social, political and economic transformation within African societies?
2. What are the ways in which transformative discipleship can address hegemonic masculinities within church and society that prevents full participation of women?
3. Are there ways in which transformative discipleship can address public new religious discourses preoccupied with excessive materialism that are making radical inroads into African political spheres and prevent equal access to public resources?
4. What is the relevance of transforming discipleship in facilitating people who live on the margins to experience effective healthcare?
5. The African continent has a fast growing youth population. Therefore, in what ways can the concept of transforming discipleship address the quest of young people for fullness of life?

Asante, Natasha, Ngiyabonga, Obrigado, Danke, Merci, Thank you, I wish you all a fruitful conference and I hope this sets the African context.

Notes

- ⁱ Keynote Speech presented at the Conference of the Council for World Mission and Evangelism Arusha, Tanzania 8th March 2018.
- ⁱⁱ Mutale M. Kaunda (PhD UKZN in Gender and Religion) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is also a research coach and writing mentor to Masters Students in Gender religion and health at UKZN.
- ¹ Sick, out of employment on medical grounds, teenage children to support, depression was inevitable.
- ² This quote is taken from an online video by Brene Brown, 'The Power of Vulnerability', www.ted.com/talks/brenebrownonvulnerability.html, accessed January 21, 2018.
- ³ Culturally, we should never have been bathing my mother.
- ⁴ "The Gender Gap in Religion around the World." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. March 22, 2016. Accessed January 18th, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>.
- ⁵ Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace blog <https://www.kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/prophetic-witness/pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace> accessed on January 16, 2018.
- ⁶ My desire of becoming a nurse was tested here.
- ⁷ See the book: Bosch, David, 1991. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
- ⁸ This is the slogan of the SDGs see <https://shonaquip.co.za/wp/wpcontent/uploads/2016/11/2016SustainableDevelopmentGoals2030.pdf>
- ⁹ This is the slogan of the SDGs see <https://shonaquip.co.za/wp/wpcontent/uploads/2016/11/2016SustainableDevelopmentGoals2030.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Jooseop Keum ed. *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications 2013).