



# Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

*Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship*

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**Brief Response: Upolu Lumā Vaai, Fiji Islands, February 2018, to keynote speech:**

***Transforming Disciples, Transforming the Future: Young African Women and the Search for a “Liberated Future” by Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda.***

## **“A CALL FOR AN ECO-RELATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION”**

Let me first of all take this opportunity to sincerely congratulate Dr Mulenga-Kaunda for sharing such a powerful address, a story that not only deeply acknowledges the pain and struggle of women but also breathes a fresh air of decolonization. One that critically addresses the ‘violence of normalization’ promoted by conventional hegemonic patriarchal systems and policies. And the speaker confronted such violence through the use of the story-telling approach not only to honour the ‘stories of the victims’ but also to embrace story-telling as a missiological framework.

### **The Economy of the One**

I am particularly grateful to the speaker’s claim that transforming discipleship in the light of Christ “*necessitates integration of spiritual transformation with social, economic and political transformation and action that responds positively to the felt needs of people*”. In relation to this claim, she asked the question: “*In what way can transforming discipleship facilitate the church to engage in radical social, political and economic transformation within African societies?*” This is a very important concern as the speaker’s story highlights that the gender inequality she found herself in is deeply connected to the wider social, political, and economic injustices of her context, the injustices that forced a 17 year-old to keep a home within a poverty stricken society. An innocent teenager was dragged into the violence of the ‘economy of the one’ entrenched in social systems including the church, where leaders, as the speaker argues, are more concerned with their personal gains.

This rise of inequalities and the growing desire for personal gains have a deeper footing in a narrative that we’ve unsuspectingly adopted – that is, the neoliberal economic narrative. With no doubt about its many benefits, it is able to negatively shape how we understand relationships and how the church constructs its life and theology to support a culture of “excessive materialism”. With the increase in such culture, I wonder whether the ultimate goal of mission to have “*fullness of life for all*”, that the speaker refers to, is relational, to include ecology? This is because the church throughout the centuries has used this phrase with reference only to people. This is evident in an anthropocentric theology which claims that ecology refers ‘only’ to the environment. It means therefore that human being exist outside of ecology. Such theology is normalized in the West and popularized by theological institutions around the world through what is called ‘eco-theology’. This separation provides justification for humans to develop economies that slaughter and destroy anything or anyone in its path, including the vulnerable women who are usually, from the Pacific perspective, keepers of the land and ocean.

### **Eco-Relationality**

The breakdown of relationality is a foundational factor to problems such as gender inequality and economic injustices. This has occurred because we have lost the biblical foundational faith: “In the beginning was relationship!” All of life is an ‘assemblage of relationality’, after the image of the relational God through Christ who wills for us to be ‘relationally distinct and distinctly relational’. All of us are

meant to exist in an ‘eco-relational household’ where harmony of life is upheld and resources are meant to be shared. In such a household, despite being different in race, gender, and identity we are all diversely connected through an ‘ecological reference’. Therefore, nothing exists outside of such reference. Humans are believed to be ‘ecologically formed’. I stand up here as a portion of the land of my ancestors, alive and breathing because of this mutual connection. The environment is meant to be ‘ecologically structured’. Communities and societies should be ‘ecologically ordered’. Our languages are meant to be ‘ecologically nuanced’. Even God ecologically modifies Godself through the work of the Spirit in order to be part of eco-relationality. This ‘ecological reference’ informs us that eco-relationality is like a strand in the global mat that connects all of us humans as well as our activities to the soil, ocean, water, trees, sky, and God. This fact is foundational to what is called ‘Relational Ecumenism’.

This is where the speaker’s insistence on the work of the Spirit is critical. To emphasize relational ecumenism is to re-centre the transforming role of the Spirit in mission. The Spirit is not just the force behind the dynamic flow of relationality. The Spirit ‘is’ relationality, as the Spirit is synonymous to fluidity, openness, and transformation. It is the Spirit who continually draws us to celebrate and embrace the diverse rhythms and movements of life within the eco-relational family. In other words, being disciples ‘*moved by the Spirit*’ is to enter into a life of subversive thinking and action for the sake of sustaining the ‘economy of life’. With the absence of the Spirit, relationality could be easily twisted as a tool to support the hierarchy and the ‘economy of the one’.

### **Mission and Eco-Relationality**

The poverty Mutale refers to, that affected her family and life, occurs because relationality did not feature in the development and implementation of policies and economic frameworks. Like Mutale, our Pacific women are victims of social and economic developments: the taking by force of indigenous lands by their own local leaders and governments, the huge extraction of the minimal resources they depend on, and the zero transparency on expected benefits and their environmental impacts. But perhaps the greatest present challenge is the first ever ocean drilling or sea-bed mining in the world which is likely to commence next year (2019) in Papua New Guinea. Pacific women are at the forefront of fighting against this. As disciples, they have taken mission to another level where lives of women and that of land and ocean are closely reweaved. Why? Because in the Pacific indigenous world view, the land and the ocean are deeply connected to the meaning of being a tamaitai (female). Women are reflections of eco-relationality. Therefore a drilling or resource extraction of any kind not only fractures the harmony and interconnectedness of the whole, it also endorses the slow killing of vulnerable communities.

Overall while I embrace the speaker’s call for a radical mission formation for disciples, I would go further to call on the church not to limit its theology of mission to the idea of evangelizing people for the sake of nurturing disciples, but to make sure that its mission is able to locate and openly critique the ‘economy of the one’ that is at the heart of poverty and ecological destruction as well as to restore eco-relationality and harmony for the “fullness of life for all”. The greatest challenge for the Pacific churches today with islands sinking due to climate change is to produce an eco-relational theology of mission that is Spirit driven. One that is able to link the suffering of the vulnerable to poverty and ecological annihilation, and that is transformative and subversive to promote the ‘economy of life’.

So let me conclude by acknowledging the committee for giving me this great honour to respond to such depth and wisdom of a sister in Christ. As we say in Fiji: Vinaka vakalevu! Soifua!