



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

8-13 March 2018 – Arusha, Tanzania

Document No. **PLEN 04.1**

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Becoming Disciples, Transforming the World

Luke 4: 16-21

Keynote Message

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Paul tells us that those who live in the Spirit, must also walk in the Spirit. (Gal5:25) I suggest to you that becoming disciples, transforming the world (the theme of our mission from the margins plenary) is the mark of those who live and walk in the Spirit. And who better to show us exactly what that means in practice than our Lord Jesus according to Luke.

We see him standing in the temple proclaiming that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; that he had been anointed to bring Good News to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

There is no ambiguity here: to live and walk in the Spirit is to be the bearers of **the** Good News! Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Good News is Christ, who brings the reign of God's justice and peace to confront degenerative human conditions by transforming the hearts of those who should choose to love him.

In short, becoming disciples is precisely to be Christ's Good News for a world that dearly and clearly needs his transforming love.

We are gathered today in Arusha to prayerfully re-think and reimagine the call to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ We come knowing that in many places we need to revitalise, rethink, and perhaps even revolutionalise the church as an instrument of mission now and in the coming years.

If your experiences are like mine since my arrival in beautiful Tanzania on Monday for the Indigenous Youth Pre-Conference, then you will agree with me that it is an absolute joy to be here and that our gathering is an inspiring fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, our task of discerning God's mission for our times involves understanding the signs of the times and the implications of that for the mission we are called to serve.

As an Indigenous person, I cannot help carrying in my being and bringing along with me the pain and cry of mother earth which is God's precious creation. That is to say that the groaning of all of creation is with us, here - prompting us to remember that as disciples of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are bearers of God's Good News for all longing for justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Needless to say, that becoming disciples and transforming the world are not possible without the Good News of Christ breaking through with the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ "And Jesus said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always." Matthew 28:18-20.

Here we pause and ask a most fundamental question: Is our notion of discipleship inclusive of those who exist in the marginal spaces of our times and world?

If so, then it follows that the church must view those in the margins with the same agency, dignity, and grace which Christ affords them in the Gospels! Remembering that God gives power and strength to the weak,² the outcast, and those who go without.

I want to be clear that I make no exclusive claims on the 'margins' - epistemologically or as a social location. While in this address I choose to remain within the parameters of Luke's social categories, I am mindful that even there, poverty is not limited to material realities and that human captivity comes in various forms.

Our liturgical framing and movement in this plenary opens up a space for the church to pause, reflect, and most importantly, listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say for the times we are living in. We live in times where Christian witness and service are more needed than ever before.

It is no accident that at this moment we are led to focus our attention on the margins and the marginalised. The profound significance of Luke's text is not only that it locates God's mission **at** and **from** the margins, but it also spells out in Jesus' own words what that mission from the margins looks like. Indeed, Jesus proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to transform, empower and liberate the poor in heart, spirit, and material riches, and by doing this he affirmed the fact that God's mission begins always at the margins and not from the top echelons of institutions, governments, and powerful positions of affluence - Jesus operated from the margins and it was from these margins that he brought the transformation which we proclaim today!!

As St Athanasius of Alexandria reflected in the 4th century, "For one who wanted to make a display, the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way, was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it..."

Can you imagine the impact on me as a young Indigenous person to discover that Jesus lived as a marginalised youth? A marginalised status that God bestowed on him from birth. How amazing is it that the all-powerful and omniscient God of the Universe should choose to enter into our humanity as a helpless child surrounded by animals and witnessed to by shepherds and foreigners!³

In this very conference I believe we define youth as up to mid-30s so I dare say Jesus would definitely be a 'youth' here. And even if that was not the case, Jesus at the time he was walking this earth in Palestine would still have been far younger than the average age in many of our mainline churches today. Yet, as a young person on the margins, his agency has set the tone for God's mission in the last two millennia! Can we please savour this moment! This moment when the church is reminded that our Redeemer and Saviour was my age when he proclaimed his manifesto in his hometown of Nazareth!!!

A manifesto that defined his ministry in terms of subverting worldly power structures so that the weak and vulnerable can access the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. A manifesto that characterises God's loving mission as always beginning from lowly places, and with lowly people, whom the world often shuns and forgets. This is what mission at and from the margins looks like. And Christ's ministry at the margins worked because it was in these marginalised spaces that the sinful structures of oppression were manifested most evidently. In our day, it is at the margins that Christian witness and service can be seen in action in profoundly transforming ways. At the margins the agency of the marginalised is not in dispute. More importantly, in marginal spaces any concerns to make distinctions between mission and diakonia could not be more irrelevant.

² "He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might he increases strength." Isaiah 40:29.

³ Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:8-20.

I see the WCC's commitment to the ministry of diakonia as a prophetic affirmation of Christian mission and discipleship from the margins. Its theological framing of diakonia is rooted in Christ's mission of service that liberates the oppressed, gives sight to the blind, and heals the sick. Clearly mission and diakonia are integral to each other and through the prophetic function of the Holy Spirit they work to transform the dysfunctions of our world so that God's reign of justice and peace can be rooted in the hearts of generations to come, who in turn become living witnesses to the transformational power of Christ.

Recognising the agency of disciples at the margins continues to be a challenge for the church. One of my most memorable experiences at our Indigenous Youth Pre-Conference was having the space to try and unpack the church's traditionally 'centric' approach to mission which objectifies marginalised persons like me as recipients of the Good News of Christ from privileged beneficiaries of systems that ignorantly sustain the injustices that compound my marginality. Our theme 'Walking in the Spirit: Indigenisation as Transforming Discipleship' was an exercise in affirming and asserting our agency as young Indigenous peoples. Part of our message to this World Mission Conference and to the world church is to say:

We are here, we exist, see us, hear us, we are integral to Christ's church. We are poor, we are blind, we are captives, we are unfavoured, but we refuse to be invisible anymore, for we are Christ's beloved, we have agency for we live and walk in the Spirit, and we too are bearers of Christ's hope and we too are agents for transforming the world!

Therefore, today is a call for a revolutionary reform of Christian mission, that in the era of information, technology, and globalisation, where excessive consumerism and hedonism feeds into the structures which uphold injustices of greed, violence, and oppression, **we the church, Christ's church to which we belong**, can no longer afford to ignore the prophetic voices coming from the margins. The church must take the lead in preventing the subversion of the margins to tokenistic agendas that serve the mainstream while limiting their agency as bearers of the Good News towards transforming the world.

Today, I have been given the privilege to stand before you, an indigenous voice from the nation of Fiji in the region of Oceania. I am of the Aisokula tribe from the northern island of Taveuni and I come from a diverse group of peoples from the Pacific Ocean who are rich in history, spirituality, culture, tradition, and epistemologies.

The church has now been in our waters for almost two-hundred years, bringing with it the Good News of Christ and transforming the religious landscape, where the church to this day remains a powerful and affluent entity in the region.

However, it must be noted that for many island nations the historical backdrop to this conversion was the proliferation of Christianity on the tail of colonisation. This issued the "wholesale condemnation" of our cultures as being "savage, lascivious, and barbaric,"⁴ stripping many of us of our dignity while subverting our agency so that we become mere **receivers** of the Good News and therefore never to be an equal.

By God's grace we as recipients of the Good News reclaimed our agency by the power of God's Holy Spirit, thereby joining the ranks of Christ's faithful disciples. This has been true for many of us the peoples of Oceania. We have received the Good News within the context of our struggles and this have raised up disciples who live and walk by the Spirit, transforming our own lives as well as the contexts in which we find ourselves.

Throughout the Pacific the problem of Climate Change continues to intensify with the island nations of Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands facing the fight for their very existence as higher sea levels threaten both homes and cultural identities. In recent years_escalating tropical cyclones throughout the region has created economic and structural havoc, not to mention the number of lives affected through death, psychological trauma, and impoverishment. Our natural resources continue to be exploited by

⁴ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1994): 149.

corporate giants_with the nation of West Papua paying the highest price through a 50+ year genocide which most of the world has remained silent towards.

These are not isolated cases in our Oceania context. But as disciples of Christ from the margins we continue to draw strength from the Spirit's life-giving power to prophetically contest the injustices of affluent countries who perpetuate oppressive exploits upon our lands and peoples.

As marginalised peoples we do not have the economic and political power to change our situations, but as Christ poignantly demonstrated throughout his life-giving ministry, the power to radically transform the world is entirely possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, as I stand here today in front of you, a very ordinary young Indigenous woman, with no special status or position in life to boast about. I speak on behalf of all my Indigenous siblings here this morning and those who cannot be here; on behalf of all our communities struggling to overcome the adversities that have become our norm; and on behalf of all those Indigenous heroes and heroines who have gone before us! I stand here and I say to you:

I am Adi Mariana Waga, I am poor, I am bound, I am unfavoured, I am oppressed! But I am a precious child made in the Image of God. I have agency, I am worthy, I have a voice, and I am free! I am free because I live and walk in the Spirit! I am free and I joyfully bear God's Good News and hope as Christ's disciple from the margins transforming the world. Thanks be to God!