

“Living in God’s Amazing Grace: Thanks be to God”

Keynote Speech by Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro

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My husband Muhungi Kanyoro and I are delighted to be here with you at this ELCA 2007 Churchwide assembly. We had planned to be elsewhere on vacation but Bishop Mark Hanson convinced us that being here now was the right thing to do. So we shifted our plans. We have come here to celebrate with you the fulfillment of hope, as we thank God for living in God’s amazing grace that accepts us just as we are, or as Luther would put it, “as we may become”. The hope, which we share as the people of God, is hope against hope. In Africa an occasion such as this is full of dancing in the aisles as an expression of gratitude and joy that we are all able to gather in one place in the presence of an amazing God.

I know well that these are hard times for words of hope. We are numbed by acts of violence and by the suffering it causes - weapons and words of destruction everywhere; women, men and children at graves; hopes raised and hopes dashed. The future we long for seems so far off, remote and unattainable. At the same time, we are reminded in a most wonderful way that hope is the inseparable companion of faith. If we lose hope we lose faith. There is no faith without hope.

My faith is sustained daily by people that I meet. One of them is Kousalya, an Indian woman who was recently a recipient of the World YWCA Leadership Award. I first met Kousalya in 2004 at the

International AIDS Conference in Bangkok. She told me that visits to hospitals were part of her life just to visits to cinemas and supermarkets are part of the lives of other people. Yes, Kousalya is HIV positive but she has not let the virus drag her down to negativity. She has fought it in every way she can, not only inside her body or in Namakkal her home town in Tamil Nadu, but all over the world. Ten years ago Kousalya was the ordinary bride of a truck driver. Within a month of her marriage her husband fell ill. His doctors wanted a test on her to be done too; the result said she was HIV positive. She did not know even what HIV was. The doctors gave her two months to live. She proved them wrong. Eight years later since then, Kousalya is the face of India's battle against the dreaded HIV virus. Her strength shows through her determination to eradicate stigma. This is hope against hope.

Thank God for the opportunity to remind ourselves that we are living in God's amazing grace. There are many things to thank God for. We thank God for those pioneers who walked the journey of inclusiveness in this Church. ELCA is a church that celebrates women and men, laity and ordained in the mission and ministries of the church. The saints, both living and dead took risks and overcoming fear they stood on the promise of God by faith, so that we may inherit the outcomes that we celebrate today. Now their legacy invites us to do more.

Our foremothers and fathers invite us to go into the future caring for that image of God that is found in all human beings. Not just whites or blacks or browns or yellows but all beings, men and women and children. Not just the rich or poor, not even just the

Christians or Jewish or Muslims, but all human beings. The image of God is present in every human being and the future of this church depends on how we discover and honor God through caring and loving that human person made in God's image, wherever she or he is to be found.

Sometimes this image of God is in those who come to the soup kitchens in the poor sectors of our cities, and other time it is found in gay and lesbian persons in our families, churches and societies. Sometimes God's image is in the immigrant communities, refugees, and people so close to us that we don't see them until there is a catastrophe such as Katrina to shine light on them. There is no distance in God's world. We are all connected through creation and through this image of God that we all carry.

The Church is called to love and care for God's creation, and also to be prophetic in its words and actions. A particularly difficult area within the mandate of the church today is to discern what indeed is prophetic in our times. Knowing how and even what is probably not the problem. In our times, we might even say we know too much. Our problem seems rather to be in the choices that we make with knowledge. It is not lack of knowledge that creates fear, divisions and conflicts in our families, churches and the world. It is not the absence of knowledge that leads us to pollute our seas, lakes and rivers. It is not the absence of knowledge that destroys the protective blanket of our atmosphere or the habitat of our companion wildlife and human neighbors. It is not even lack of knowledge that is fueling the spread HIV and AIDS pandemic or creating such a big gap between poverty and wealth in our world.

And even where ignorance does play a part, we can remedy it and it will likely be overcome. Knowledge does not come to us just through our faith communities because we know profoundly well that the most sacred of texts are not written in holy books but on the lines of every human face, regardless of home or religion. Sadly we must conclude that knowledge in itself is not a guarantee of either progress or morality or being prophetic.

At the root is the courage to act on our knowledge. The issue here is our freedom to choose or not to choose to be prophetic. We are free to choose to understand better those who differ from us. We can commit ourselves to a path of economic and social justice.

There are great big barriers that hinder us from taking the more risky and dangerous paths that might in fact be prophetic. Sometimes the barrier is to be found in our history and culture that make us afraid to do a new thing. In my current job, I lead a movement that has been in existence for more than 150 years and I have often heard members say, we cannot do this because we have never done it before, or we did these 50 years ago and it was horrible and we cannot do it again, or this is not the YWCA way of doing things.

Other times we are just gripped with fear. There is no part of the world where people are free from fear today. We fear big things and little people including our own children who pull guns and kill. We want someone to do something, but we are also afraid to break away from the long history of submission to authority, both political and ecclesiastical. So we wait and wait and our hope turns into

despair or apathy. Thus, the problem becomes too big and impossible for us to act on it, or even have an opinion on it. But we must remember that our God does not permit us to make peace with oppression – either our own or that of others. Justice delayed is justice denied.

Sometimes our prophetic conscience is trapped in strands of individualism, which blind us to seeing those with whom we can act for strength, skills and resources. Or we become victims of the rapid changes in our world, which are constantly impacting on us and directing the way we think, talk and act. We watch the same media from all corners of the world and we believe what we see and hear because we prefer to cautiously adopt the back sit driving in the face of those insistent issues. This is one of the outcomes of globalization. Globalization is a much-used word today even though it is an ill-defined concept. It is a fact though, that in our world today is difficult to monitor the transnational flows of information, capital, entertainment, people, plagues, drugs, weapons, diseases and toxic waste. What happens on one side of the world has consequences on the other side of the world in quicker and stronger ways than we have known in the past. Good and bad consequences alike. Globalization marginalizes the poor people and poor nations and the consequent suffering and death are evident. Caring for those who drop off the radar of the positive things of globalization and advocating for justice is prophetic.

We can be safe together and we can share the fruits of our world together. That is why I plead with ELCA to intensify the global vision of this church. To sustain this vision may require courage to

undertake difficult issues and to ask the hard questions. Our amazing God can give us the boldness to listen and embrace those insistent prophetic voices, which confront us with the radical dimensions of God's word. Our future and the future of the church is about bearing witness to God's love affair with the World. The Bible says: " ... for God so loved the World ... (John 3:16). We must yearn, wait, risk and actively desire to be prophetic because ultimately we know that we can trust our amazing God to be our companion along the way.

Being prophetic about women

Allow me to use the remaining time to focus in the area of my ministry, which is intrinsically connected to justice with and for women. I believe that a good way to measure the wellbeing of a country or a church is by approaching it through the status of women and children. Twenty years of intensive work with women is license enough for me to see the world and the church through women's eyes.

The last time I spoke at an ELCA Churchwide assembly was in Philadelphia, 1997. I was then in transition from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) where I had spent 10 years working globally with women in Lutheran Churches to the World Young Women Christian Association. The YWCA is the largest women's membership social movement founded on Christian principles by Christian women more than 150 years ago. The YWCA movement annually touches the lives of more than 25 million women and girls in 125 countries. This is to say that for twenty years women have shaped my thinking and my actions.

I feel like a homecoming to be back in the Lutheran. When my children come back home from University, they are often curious about the way I have moved around the furniture in the house. Sometimes they ask what happened to the piece of furniture that they left in one place in the house and I have to explain that we no longer needed so I got rid of it. In my homecoming back to the Lutheran family, you would not be surprised for me to ask what happened to the Commission for Women in the ELCA? Dr. Mary J. Streufert has played the role of mum and responded well through the report on Justice for Women in Church and Society. Allow me to offer some comments to enhance that report, drawing from my experience working with women globally.

Celebrate Progress, but more is needed

The fact that today there are considerable numbers of women in leadership positions in society and in church, including ordained ministries, is not a sign of achieved justice for women. The truth about our world is told through the persistent faces of poverty and the inequality among the world's people and between its women and men. Women still hold only 16% of parliamentary seats worldwide. Sexual abuse of women is still rampant everywhere, including the church. Poverty among women is still passed on from one generation to another. Trafficking in girls and women has become a lucrative trade comparable to trade in drugs. The HIV and AIDS pandemic has become feminized especially in Africa and among young women. Poor working women rather than benefiting from new employment opportunities opened by globalization, they are instead frequently relegated to insecure work in informal

economy where they are exploited and abused. Paying attention to women is still an issue of justice and the church does not have a choice in this.

Women have spent decades building trust in each other through women only spaces in communities all over the world. As women talked to one another, we began to discover that our individual experiences of discrimination, triviality, abuse and distortion were not unique to geography, culture or socio-economic status. Finding a common ground where we did not expect to, we discovered women's stories as a crucial entry point to women's solidarity. Our social analysis has provided both the therapy we need to heal from our past and also given us the possibility to use our collective power to change our lives and to invest in the future generation of women. Global solidarity, bonding, connecting, networking and supporting one another are actions that we continue to value in the women's spaces.

In the process of listening to each other's stories, we have discovered common themes, but we have also confronted our differences sharply and often uncomfortably. Our experiences are similar but they are not homogeneous. Women's lives are lived in very different contexts, which sharply mark us. Among the differences, which seem most significant are those which mark us within the borders of economics, race, culture, caste, geography, generation, sexuality, education, health and disabilities. The credibility of our story will be measured on how we acknowledge and manage these differences without being trapped into

helplessness, powerlessness and matronizing paradigms or building other fences even as we demolish some.

Women's actions are about falling into passion with principles that lead us to compassion. Principles don't move us like passions do, but principles can guide our passions and groom them into compassion. Such principles help us to implement justice and fairness and to be consistent so that we do not become ambiguous in the way we act.

Today in the women's movement, women activists spend a great deal of time exploring the question "how can women and men resolve what keeps us in opposing camps so that we can better recognize our common humanity and responsibility to each other and to the environment." The debate is no longer how can we be strong alone but rather how can we be strong together. However, the old question of the Bible is still true "can two people walk together unless they agree?" (Amos 3:3). There are still many men and women who have not reached a point of agreeing to care for each other and love one another as God loved the world. This is what continues to justify women only safe spaces. Even though our world is changing and these spaces are brought to question, the purpose for which they were created is still valid.

Some believe that keeping women only spaces isolates issues of justice for women in ghetto-like entities, accessible only to women. Others believe that the way to achieve justice for women is to create opportunities for men and women to "reason together". The implementation of this latter theory is what is commonly referred to

as gender mainstreaming. The gender approach capitalizes on how societies and cultures influence the way men and women are treated and the values that determine justice and injustice to men and women.

For the last 10 years, there has been extensive gender mainstreaming in governments, ecumenical bodies, churches and even in women's organizations. The intention is always to ask for greater accountability from populations and leadership. Although we don't yet have critical examples of success stories of gender mainstreaming, there are ongoing watchdog activities to monitor and evaluate its effectiveness as a strategy for achieving justice for women.

Some of the evidence available shows that gender mainstreaming obscures the reality of women and in most cases has resulted into greater bureaucracy, invisibility of women's leadership and lack of safe places for women's self-empowerment. Women's spaces have given women the security to explore, deconstruct and develop strategies to address the gender roles that society, family, religion and the media impose on them. This is particularly important today as we continually witness the feminization of poverty, HIV and AIDS, human trafficking and domestic violence. The pervasive discrimination and violence against women cannot be reversed by a handful of promising practices and success. If justice for women real matters, it must be accompanied by arrangements and reforms in structures and systems to protect women's human rights and financial commitment to repair the injustice to women.

I believe that the ELCA is a church, which hungers for justice for women, and I am sharing my comments not as a criticism to the direction that ELCA has taken, but rather as an enhancement of how that decision can bear fruit. These comments are intended to enhance the report of the Director for Justice for Women in Church and Society.

If women are mainstreamed, caution has to be taken to ensure that there are mechanisms of authority, voice, resources and accountability needed for women to be equal players and that their issues are not pitied against other emerging critical issues. It is important for example that funding for women's leadership development does not get side tracked to building houses destroyed by storms.

Allow me to highlight four areas, which must be guarded.

1. Transforming Power Relationships

Women's empowerment involves transforming power relationships at individual, collective and institutional levels. For decades women have used their power to organize and mobilize solidarity among themselves. They used collective power to move issues such as domestic violence, rape, and reproductive choices from the private to the public sphere. Women have used systems and conferences to get their voices heard and documented in conventions such the Beijing Platform for Action or the Millennium Development Goals. Women have learnt to work in difference but

giving each other voice such that even if the power imbalance between and among women is still a reality, there is generally a well-developed global solidarity among women, which needs to be protected.

Such power relations are protected in the women only spaces because women hold each other accountable. It is a well known fact for example, that women from other cultures have provided a very strong critique to western women theologians and through this critique, new voices of mujerista theologians, African women theologians, Pacific women theologians, etc. have found their own platform of authority.

As ELCA sets tables of women and men discussing justice for women, it is important to be sure that the women on those tables still carry the mandate of other women and they have a passion to bring to the table the reality of the less privileged women. It is also important that the men who speak for women are humble enough to remember that they are not women and not even 'honorary women'. They only understand partially the reality of women and they must know when to let go their egos and listen to the pain of women.

In the women's movement we still have not gathered and sifted enough data on whether women change the structures of leadership when they get there or whether structures change women who get to top leadership. The ELCA is at the stage where you can examine how the church has been changed by bishops and pastors who are women or how women pastors, bishops and

church executives have been changed by the structure. What kind of power relationship exists when women are part of the equation?

It is also important to watch out that women do not become even more marginalized and excluded because their only spaces are now shared with men. The question of women's participation is still valid and gender mainstreaming should always be tested on how many more opportunities it has opened for women, rather than how many men are now discussing gender justice for women. As HIV positive women recently stated "Nothing about us without us."

2. Scaling up what works for women

Gender mainstreaming must also involve a strong programme on scaling up what works for justice for women. Working to build capacities of women through leadership development, skills training and other formations is one way of correcting the wrong that was done to women. Providing remedial and support services is another area that must be scaled up. When dealing with violence for example, it may mean more counseling and shelter services and also resources for fresh start for those women who choose to make new beginnings.

In addition, there is a need to enhance support services for women such as day-care centers for their children, continuing education for teen mothers, health care opportunities for older women and strong advocacy programmes for emerging issues of every time and generation. The church can work in partnership with others in their communities to scale up such programmes as reparation for justice for women.

3. Accountability to women

Mainstreaming usually aims at ensuring greater accountability from a more diverse sector of population but gender mainstreaming must put women at the center as subjects. Accountability means ensuring that women's voices are not silenced even if their story is shocking. If women want to demonstrate against rape or lack of reproductive choices, they must not be muted because of policy that often has to be protected in bureaucracies.

Accountability to women is about protecting the human rights of all women in all places, all the time. A woman does not stop being a woman when she is a prostitute or a lesbian or when she is living with HIV and AIDS.

Accountability includes setting aside budgets to help meet the needs relating to justice for women.

And finally, as a sign of democracy and responsibility, allowing watchdog function of groups within the church is part of accountability to justice for women that the church must nurture.

4. Affirming the authority of women

In governments where women have been mainstreamed, ministers of women affairs serve as focal points for women's issues but they neither have cabinet status nor their own budgets. They are expected to influence others through uncoordinated and under resourced gender focal units. The landscape of marginalized women's rights and gender equality structures is replicated in

many different contexts. This must not become a case in the church. In the ecumenical movement, women continue to regret the disappearance of the Sub Unit of Women in the World Council of Churches because it also made invisible the women leaders who were responsible for women's justice. An important way to affirm women's authority is to enhance the status of women who are responsible for units of justice for women. This is both a statement of the fact that they represent half of the world, but even more important is giving them the opportunity to bring issues affecting women to the highest decision making tables.

Hope for the Future

The late Yale Professor Letty Russell, in her book, *The Church in the Round*¹, uses the image of a round church as an inclusive, hospitable space where those who are struggling to link faith and social action find a home as they try to join God's mission to heal a broken world. She defines church in the round as "a community of faith and struggle working to anticipate God's new creation by becoming partners with those who are at the margins of church and society". This author, pastor, activist and theologian has given us the language to speak about our faith and struggle in the Church. Professor Russell died from cancer on 12th of July 2007, but her vision for being church will continue to inspire many.

Women have been at the margins of the church and society for so long so that they have learnt to be "in the round". Only a month ago, 2000 women from every corner of the world made a

¹ Letty Russell, *church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox press, 1993.

commitment to provide leadership to bring change to communities that are suffering from the AIDS pandemic. As the convener of this gathering, the International Women's Summit on Women and HIV and AIDS, the World YWCA is convinced that progress will be evident when the world recognizes the leadership of women living with HIV and AIDS. People living with HIV and AIDS are at the margin of our societies.

I am grateful to ELCA for having traveled this path with us by sponsoring HIV positive women and sending high-level representatives from this church to be with us in Nairobi. HIV is very close to me because it has affected men and women that I know, among them members of my family. I am completely committed to be part of those that are looking for solutions to HIV and AIDS and I ask you to join me and the World YWCA in this journey, of which we know the beginning but not yet the end. You can join in our journey for justice for women by acting to the "Call to Action" that is a result of the Nairobi 2007 International Women's Summit on Women and HIV and AIDS, the text of which has been provided to you. I ask you to use this text in your congregations and to send it to family and friends. You can find it at the World YWCA website: www.worldywca.org.

In conclusion, I ask you to join me in reading out the Pledge to Commitment as one way of responding to issues of justice for women.

May the amazing grace of God grant us ability to honor our pledge for justice and to be prophetic in God's world. Thank you.