



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

8-13 March 2018 – Arusha, Tanzania

Document No. **PLEN 1.4**

EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY **

Response Néstor Míguez to keynote speech:

Life prepares us for discipleship; mission prepares us for life

Reflections on **Transforming Disciples, Transforming the Future:**

Young African Women and the Search for a Liberated Future, by Dr Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda

First of all, I would like to express my thanks to Dr Mulenga-Kaunda for her outstanding presentation, both simple and profound, and the personal commitment she displayed therein. Not only did she give a powerful presentation, but she also provided insights into her own life and personality. My gratitude also goes to the Programme Committee for giving me an opportunity to express myself and thus share with you my own thoughts and experience in this field. And of course, I wish to give thanks to God and the Holy Spirit who have brought all of us together here once again, to strengthen us as disciples of Jesus, in prayer and mutual witness.

Telling our story

Through this narrative, we have learned once again how in many cases the dramatic life circumstances in which people's lives are shaped play a decisive role in our journey — the path towards the collective "us" on which the Spirit leads us, helps us understand our faith and our responsibility, and gives us food for thought and criticism regarding our own life and culture.

The real life stories of women and men allow us to comprehend how not only everyday circumstances but also the major issues of culture, economics and politics result in pain and suffering or lead to the fulfilment or lack thereof of their desires and joys. As Mutale's narrative reminds us, a mother's premature death, in its cause and consequences, is also an economic, cultural and political fact. And such facts, which sometimes seem so abstract and remote, so out of reach for ordinary people, reveal their destructive or life-giving power in the consequences and constructions they give people in their searches, struggles and hopes.

Life prepares us for mission

I remember that when I started out as a student teacher, we were told that we had to go from the concrete to the abstract, from the simple to the complex. However, it would appear that theology and even missiology ignore this advice. This opening session of the conference is useful because it brings us back to the value of this premise, provides us with a perspective and offers us a way for all of our future efforts. True mission and discipleship are not resolved in dense academic elucubrations, even though sometimes, and only sometimes, the latter have something to offer, but in their capacity to change and transform people's everyday lives for good.

This lets us see how life prepares us for mission. Our own experiences, frustrations and pain, on the one hand, or the gestures of solidarity, tokens of love or care for others offer not only opportunities for growth but also areas for manifesting the grace of God, the gifts of His Spirit, and the presence of Jesus Messiah in our lives. This in turn prepares us for mission, for the possibility of being sensitive to the suffering of our fellow beings and also sharing their struggles and joys. Because this is transformative discipleship.

And these stories make up history. Whereas the grand official narratives deal with the biggest names and the events that shake the world, these in turn are composed of the millions of small dramas and dreams of ordinary people. Just look at the gospels: the story of Jesus is built on the testimony of the blind who could see, women viewed as impure who dared to come near, widows made desperate due to illness or the death of a son or daughter, possessed persons whose evil spirits were cast out, cured lepers and so many other anonymous persons whose personal stories are mingled with the story of God incarnated in a local carpenter, who suffered on the cross but sealed with them a covenant of love that gave them dignity and made them people. Mutale's personal story combines with and adds colour to these other stories and, like she herself says, to so many other anonymous stories of African women and girls who seek, hope for and find redemption and the strength to go on in their struggles in divine love and grace. Life prepares us for mission.

Discipleship forms and transforms us for life

Allow me, in conclusion, to say something about my own story. My childhood and youth were not marked by dramatic moments as in Mutale's case. There was enough to get by, and I was a happy middle-class child who had a pastor for father, a mother who was a kindergarten teacher, and who grew up in a modest working-class neighbourhood. Only later did I experience marginalization and threats to my life, when I myself became a Methodist pastor and my involvement in the struggle for social justice and human rights led to my persecution by the military dictatorship in my country. In those dark years, along with so many companions who were killed, imprisoned, tortured and exiled, I received death threats, was forced into hiding for some months, and experienced risk to myself and my family. Yet along with other comrades in the struggle, believers and non-believers alike, we accompanied the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in their struggle; were able to support and encourage many victims and their families; managed to rescue others who were being hunted down; hid entire families and took out of the country many whose lives were at risk.

It is not that we were not afraid. But the mission prevailed, the mandate of solidarity was stronger, and the help and collaboration of many brothers and sisters from elsewhere, especially other churches and the World Council of Churches itself, gave us the practical solidarity and the strength and comfort we needed to move ahead. Here, it was the mission that formed us for life. Thus, we continue to face other everyday forms of violence, discrimination and oppression that persist in the supposedly democratic state in which we live in this imperialized world, not to mention other places where hatred and war, the callous ambition

of the mighty and the indiscriminate violence of the vengeful have made human life a constant way to the Calvary.

The margins, which in reality account for the majority of humanity today, are the source of our commitment. With power concentrated in the hands of less than 1% of humanity and with the destruction of Creation's resources to provide a scant 10% with abundance while almost half of humanity still suffers from poverty, we must ask ourselves today where life is. The gospel is always a questioning of existing powers from the potency of the life of the humble. Let us remember that in our story of faith, it was in marginalized Galilee and in the Messiah crucified between outcasts that we saw the importance of those excluded from history, who shaped discipleship capable of acting *Together for life*.

The wisdom that can be gleaned from these stories, together with the wisdom developed by critical thinking guided by the Spirit of God, are the indispensable strength of transformative discipleship. The experiential core of our mission is formed by the possibilities for analysing therein injustice and evil and their everyday effects, the need to study their origins and consequences, and opportunities for building alternative paths to justice and peace. Academic elaborations are only justified if they serve such stories. These stories of life, death and more life, of martyrdom and hope, of the cross and resurrection, which are interwoven with the story of Jesus Messiah and the strength of his Spirit, represent the ultimate path to any transformative discipleship. They take us from places that the powers that be have completely overlooked to the domain where the Kingdom of God and its justice will come. Life prepares us for mission, while mission prepares us to share life.