

Theme: 50 Years of Service: Celebrating Women's Call: Reflection on Jesus Christ's Mandate for Women in Mission and Ministry (Matt. 28:10)

50 Years of Shared Responsibility with God-called Women in the Church of the Province of Uganda

Keynote Address on May 3, 2017 at Uganda Christian University

The leadership of the Fellowship, my dear colleagues in the ordained ministry, the theology students and sisters in the faith, I greet you warmly in the name of our Triune God. I extend a word of welcome to all of you for having set this time aside to **reflect on Jesus Christ's Mandate for Women in Mission and Ministry**. I am sure you look forward to inspiring imagination of the future as you share your stories in the context of God's story.

You meet at Uganda Christian University, which is the seat of theological education and ministerial formation in the Church of the Province of Uganda. At the international level, the role of **shared responsibility with God-called women** has been debated for many years within the various Christian traditions of the world. This issue came up strongly in 1999 during the WCC 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe "when the delegates from Greek and Russian Orthodox churches complained that the majority of the World Council of Churches member churches and denominations ordain women as ministers and priests."¹

From the 1940s, the Church of the Province of Uganda began to respond to modern culture in many ways. For instance, during this time Bishop Tucker Theological College administration allowed Njangali as the first woman student to study theology much earlier than anyone ever thought of the ordination of women in Africa. But even then a few of us will remember reading from our Uganda Church history, the struggles the first woman deacon, Florence S. Njangali went through when she offered herself for theological education in 1942. It is said that "when Njangali set out for Bishop Tucker Theological College, it was an historic event itself. No woman had ever attended that course let alone studying alongside men."² In 1944, Njangali was appointed Lay Reader in St Peter's Cathedral, Hoima. In 1958, Njangali returned to Bishop Tucker Theological College for an ordination course but "when she signed up for theological training alongside men at the college, her male counterparts did not easily accept her in class."³

1 Christopher Byaruhanga, "Called by God but Ordained by Men: The Work and Ministry of Reverend Florence Spetume Njangali in the Church of the Province of Uganda," in *Journal of Anglican Studies* 8/2 (2013): 220.

2 Christopher Byaruhanga, "Called by God but Ordained by Men: The Work and Ministry of Reverend Florence Spetume Njangali in the Church of the Province of Uganda," in *Journal of Anglican Studies* 8/2 (2013): 225.

3 Christopher Byaruhanga, *Bishop Alfred Robert Tucker and the Establishment of the African Anglican Church* (Nairobi:

In her response to the challenges of the time, Njangali not only refused the old definitions of women's involvement in church ministry but also guided the whole church to rethink and renew its leadership policy. Referring to her experience as a woman training for church ministry Njangali said:

During my theology course at Bishop Tucker Theological College, a number of things were revealed to me about how a woman is perceived by men in the Church of the Province of Uganda. The first day I reported for lectures in a class of male students, I never believed what I heard and saw. I was told to sit outside and study from the veranda! That experience did not stop me from participating positively in any discussion. Sometimes I would stand and openly challenge what I considered oppressive tendencies against women. However, my active participation in discussions was in most cases viewed by my classmates as arrogance.⁴

Throughout her church ministry, Njangali took it upon herself to defend the rights of women as equal partners in church ministry. Her struggles came to bear fruit first, in 1960, when she was appointed and posted to Ankole-Kigezi diocese not as a deacon but as a Church Commissioned Worker to head the Mothers' Union Department.⁵ Secondly, on November 12, 1967 when a cohort of three graduates of Bishop Tucker Theological College were officially set apart as Commissioned workers in the Church of the Province of Uganda. And third, when on September 10, 1973 Njangali "became the first woman to be made a deacon by any of the two major branches of Christianity in East Africa, namely, Roman Catholic and Anglican."⁶ Although by the 1970s a woman could be ordained a deacon in the Church of the Province of Uganda, she was not allowed to be ordained a priest. This meant that a woman could be an assistant but not a full member of the clergy. Many dioceses in the Church preferred to continue with the practice of commissioning women.

During Njangali's time, the majority of men and the clergy in the Church presumed to speak for God as they demanded for total obedience of women. It was therefore not easy for a lot of women in Uganda to experience God as empowering when they were in the Church's orbit. The majority of women in the Church's orbit experienced God as a source of women oppression and Jesus as the author of the exclusion of women from sacramental roles in the Church.

Much has changed since those early days when women could study to be Church Commissioned Workers and perhaps deacons but not for priests. Those were the days when some of your ancestors

WordAlive, 2008), 177.

4 Florence S. Njangali, 'Speech at the Pastors' Retreat, 1978', File 1978/BKD/05, Bunyoro-Kitara Diocesan Office.

5 Byaruhanga, Bishop Alfred Tucker and the Establishment of the African Anglican Church, 177.

6 Byaruhanga, "Called by God but Ordained by Men: The Work and Ministry of Reverend Florence Spletume Njangali in the Church of the Province of Uganda," in Journal of Anglican Studies 8/2 (2013): 236.

yearned for an inclusive church where justice and dignity for all would be experienced. The hope was that the excluded majority participants in the church would, in future, be included not only in decision-making but also in the ordained ministry as priests thereby shaping a better future for all in the Church of the Province of Uganda. Thirty-four years ago, that vision became a reality. A revolution that started in 1960 and in 1967 culminated in the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Limuru, Kenya, declaring in 1971, that it was acceptable for a bishop to ordain a woman to priesthood with the consent of his national church or province.⁷

For the next twelve years, even with a good track record, God-called women were denied ordination to the level of a priest on the grounds that they were women. The Church of the Province of Uganda's objections were inextricably intertwined with prejudice and cultural sensitivities. Those opposed to God-called women ordination would note that throughout the Bible, and from the early church to the 1980s, God always chose only men for all leadership positions. That in ancient times, only men of a specific Jewish tribe could act as priests. This act of discrimination was rooted in the cultural bias of Ugandan men. The understanding was that God had appointed women to be subordinate to men and, therefore, there was no basis for a woman to rule over men in any way.

After many years of debate rife with disagreement, condescension and contention, the Provincial Assembly decided to remove all ambiguity and all discrimination based on sex by ordaining, in 1983, three women as priests, the Rev Grace Ndyabahika, the Rev Deborah Micungwa Rukara and the Rev Margaret Kizanye Byekwaso. In 1983, a reformation took place in the Church of the Province of Uganda when the Church of the Province of Uganda took the decision that God-called women be granted full and unrestricted rights to participate in the Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the same way as the men. At this time Church of the Province of Uganda was conscious of the way in which women were perpetually relegated to second-class citizenship in the Ugandan society and in the Church. The Province took this step of recognizing that the gifts of God may be bestowed equally upon the saints of the Church of the Province of Uganda.

Since then, women have had a long history of serving in the Church of the Province of Uganda in mission and ministry guided by a feminist theology. Today, feminist theology in the Church of the Province of Uganda is divided roughly into two categories, namely, revolutionary and reformist. The revolutionary feminist theology is produced by women in Uganda who upon examining the Christian

⁷ Anglican Consultative Council, "The Time Is Now: Anglican Consultative Council First Meeting Limuru, Kenya 23 February–5 March 1971," p. 39.

tradition, find it so male-dominated that they pronounce it as hopelessly irredeemable and therefore opt to leave the church. On the other hand, reformist feminist theologians, agree about the male-dominated character of the Christian tradition but always find reason to hope that the male dominated character may be transformed. They, therefore, chose to stay within the church of the Province of Uganda and work for reform.

This conference is a celebration that marks the awakened consciousness of the Church of the Province of Uganda that we are all equal in the eyes of God. It is a call to the Church that space should be opened for all to exercise their call irrespective of gender. My humble request is that you use this opportunity to call for ongoing reflection and action that will remove any remaining barriers in carrying out the shared responsibility with God-called women in the Church of the Province of Uganda.

The theme **50 Years of Service: Celebrating Women's Call** is both timely and necessary. Allow me to limit myself in this keynote address to the topic, “**50 Years of Shared Responsibility with God-called Women in the Church of the Province of Uganda.**” When I was invited to participate in your celebrations marking 50 years of your church ministry as a keynote speaker, I had already read a lot of materials on ecclesiology and ordered ministry with an aim to understand what the Bible says about God-called women in the Church of the Province of Uganda. On several occasions I have had the privilege of interacting with the God-called women and I have listened to moving stories of their journey. I now have reasonable confidence that (i) my understanding of the Biblical passages about God-called women in the church is in harmony with God’s intention. (ii) The tentative conclusion I have arrived at is that the fall seems to be the place where man and woman were “unequalized.” Redemption brought through Jesus “equalizes” us. However, so long as we are here on earth, we are always in the sanctification process. We shall have to wait until heaven to be fully perfected. This is the reason why from time to time the issue of shared responsibility with God-called women that was thought to be long ago resolved prove not to be so. Challenging issues are not always resolved; and rarely are they resolved for all time.

Given the important roles women currently occupy in the Church of the Province of Uganda, a question such as “are women allowed to serve in leadership positions in the church according to their training, gifts and call?” This question may seem a bit odd to some of us especially in light of the remarkable gifts and skills possessed by women. The achievements women have registered in the ministry give us the hope that, in the end, all barriers will fall. For now, however, the Church of the Province of Uganda is called upon to join God in the dismantling and overcoming of barriers, because

there are many that still stand. This could be one of the reasons why God is calling you to deliberate **on Jesus Christ's Mandate for Women in Mission and Ministry**.

One way to celebrate 50 years of service as God-called women, is to place it among the other ministries of women. The most celebrated one is the ministry of word and sacrament. It is now one more way in which women are called to serve and lead. We give thanks to God for the many God-called women who have served faithfully the Church of the Province of Uganda in that capacity over the last 34 years. We want to recognize the ministry of women; we also want to celebrate on this occasion the ordained ministry of women. This is what I have called in this keynote address “50 Years of Shared Responsibility with God-called Women in the Church of the Province of Uganda.”

As we rejoice in the work of women’s hands, hearts, and minds that have built up the body of Christ in Uganda, we give thanks, too, for the good leadership of the Church of the Province of Uganda during this time for the deliberate practice of listening to one another that usually leads, in time, to transformation. At the same time, we cannot help but recognize that this celebration also points to the so many years during which women ministered without official recognition from the Diocese of Uganda which later gave birth to the Church of the Province of Uganda.

In the midst of our celebrations, we also remember that we are called as the Church of the Province of Uganda to continual discernment. Fifty years ago, the Church of the Province of Uganda opened doors to God-called women by expanding its understanding of mission and ministry. The decision transformed the concept of leadership in the Church of the Province of Uganda, and challenged us to recognize the gifts of God in both men and women. While 50 years may seem like a long time, long enough for God-called women to be like anyone else, it is really a short time. God-called women still experience the newness of their call to ministry, for themselves and for their congregations. In all the churches of the Anglican Communion, the opportunities for women to serve as church ministers are more limited than for men. However, in the Church of the Province of Uganda, one would argue that the picture of professional marginality on the basis of sex differentiation is changing. The large scale entry of women into theological education is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part and parcel of broader changes in attitude and structure of the Ugandan society regarding a woman's place.

When the history of the Church of the Province of Uganda is written, one of the important developments to be highlighted is the entry of a good number of women into the ranks of the church, with the attendant conflicts and changes surrounding their entry into the traditionally male profession.

This change is an important phenomenon because it is either applauded or decried by Christians and scholars. The bigger question is, who are these women who offer themselves for ministry in the church? Why do they choose to go that path? What has been their experience in the ministry? These are some of the questions that have been asked by some people who view the entry of women into the church ministry either as with hope or alarm. My focus is on the Church of the Province of Uganda because of its unique treatment of women in ministry. The Church of the Province of Uganda follows more formal requirements and processes for ordaining and deploying clergy women. The Church also believes that “the Bible teaches full equality of men and women in status, giftedness and opportunity for ministry and that the church is best served when men and women share responsibilities and serve together as complementary partners.”⁸

In discussing the topic at hand, one encounters certain concepts of interpretation. One concept of particular importance today is tradition. J. I. Parker said:

All Christians are at once beneficiaries and victims of tradition – beneficiaries, who receive nurturing truth and wisdom from God's faithfulness in past generations; victims, who now take for granted things that need to be questioned, thus treating as divine absolutes patterns of belief and behavior that should be seen as human, provisional, and relative. We are all beneficiaries of good, wise, and sound tradition, and victims of poor, unwise, and unsound traditions.⁹

In any discussion of roles for men and women in the Church of the Province of Uganda, the influence of tradition is a key concept that must be considered. Tradition, in this paper, is defined as the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation that influence the present. With time, we observe attitudes and behaviors in the church undergo transformation much in the same way we see them change in the world around us. As we observe how traditional roles for women have evolved in our society and culture, it is logical to accept that traditional roles of women in the Church of the Province of Uganda have been impacted as well. When it comes, for instance, to the ordained ministry, there are occasions when the basis of a particular practice in the church is grounded in tradition rather than what some people would call sound doctrinal teaching.

Today, there are some voices that are alarmed by women's participation in the mission Dei as ordained ministers. They base their alarm on Scripture. I want to observe that there are inconsistencies in the way the Bible texts concerning women were translated. The translators of those texts were apparently guided by the presuppositions of their own culture. As a church with roots in the Anglican tradition we

8 Oak Hills Church , “A Study of the Role of Women in the Church,” p. 4.

9 J. I. Parker, quoted in Jack Deere, Surprised by the Power of the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1993), 53.

are blessed with open access to scripture in our own languages, and we are expected to learn to read, understand and obey the Bible, with the help of the Holy Spirit and those gifted to teach and preach the Word of God. We have always to remember that the Bible is God's Word, but read and interpreted through weak human instruments. For this reason, any meaningful exegesis involves understanding the human context. We do not do justice to God's Word when we take out of context passages such as 1 Cor. 14:34 (women should remain silent in the churches) and 1 Tim. 2:12 (I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent). Sometimes theologians take the "it-says-what-it-means-and-means-what-it-says" approach. This approach has led to the reading of the text from the framework of personal presuppositions and cultural biases in the church, possibly without anyone even realizing it.

What complicates the ability to understand the Shared Responsibility with God-called Women in the church? There are a number of issues: (a) personal biases that are as a result of traditional hierarchical cultural and religious roots that are related to the traditional ways of interpreting scripture with little attention to the context. These intellectual mindsets are not only very difficult to overcome but also changing them requires a lot of patience. (b) Fear. There is fear of changing things and losing the status and personal power which men have in the church. Changes must be carefully explained and must be handled gently. This is because issues of shared responsibility with God-called women touch the innermost archives of people's hearts. (c) closely related to the above is the desire to maintain the status quo. Theological colleges and universities equip women to function in a hierarchical culture. There is need to teach both men and women not only about how to live and function in an egalitarian relationship but also on "gender appreciation but not hierarchical complementarianism." In order for the above to be realized, the Church of the Province of Uganda must be immersed in prayer. Prayer is an opportunity to rest in God in order to stay awake to what is true. God is looking for a Church of the Province of Uganda that does not only follow the transforming spirit of God but also where a new reality that is beyond the logic of the world is born. In Matthew 28:10 Jesus makes two requests: (a) Do not be afraid (b) Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.

What has been their experience in the ministry? Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt argue that women's leadership style matches that is needed for managers of the future.¹⁰ They say that a woman leader translates values and "behavior she was socialized to possess into valuable job skills."¹¹

10 Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt, Megatrends for Women (London: Villard Books, 1992), 88.

11 Aburdene and Naisbitt, Megatrends for Women, 89.

Conclusion

Although I respect and acknowledge those who take a different view, I no longer see the Bible establishing a doctrine which would prohibit either gender from exercising their God given gifts in Mission Dei. The Rev. Canon Njangali was not allowed in class to study with men but she never gave up. Last year, I was invited to attend the morning Worship Service at one of the Free Methodist Churches , USA. The sermon was about the Good Samaritan. The preacher asked the question; “What happens when love crosses the street?” I want to suggest that the tenacity of Njangali to respond to Jesus Christ's Mandate to participate in Mission and Ministry in the midst of the then prevailing confusion in shared responsibility in the church is love crossing the street. Today, I ask the question; how do you imagine love crossing the road in your context?

My suggestion is that barriers must continue falling as love crosses the road. The celebration of 50 Years of Shared Responsibility with God-called Women in the Church of the Province of Uganda is also a time to give thanks to God for preparing the Church of the Province of Uganda to receive women's contribution. Thanks to Bishop Tucker and other theological colleges that have trained women for mission and ministry and to the parishes that have received them. Thanks to all the people who have supported women's mission and ministry. It is a time, too, to hope that the Church of the Province of Uganda will continue to open itself to the ministry of God-called women, so that women, along with men, might tell their stories and preach the gospel to their respective communities. We are, this year, remembering what God did for us as a Church 50 years ago. I request you not to celebrate your successes but what God has done for and through the God-called women.

To God be all the Glory!