

Celebrating Our Global Diversity
Church Wide Gathering of the Presbyterian Women USA
July 8, 2006

By Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro
General Secretary, World YWCA

God Created Diversity

Thank you for inviting me. It is wonderful to be here. The best part of standing up here is that I can see what a beautiful picture of diversity we make together. But difference does not define our being here together. We are here because of our common humanity as God's own creation and our shared values and faith in God. So I am inviting you to celebrate diversity not because of our differences but rather because of sameness.

It is recorded in the book of Genesis that God created a world of diversity and each time as God created every kind of creature, there is the refrain: "And God saw that it was good [Gen. 1:25]." At the end of the story God even saw that it was very good and God celebrated by resting peacefully.

God's gift of understanding across difference is expressed in the outpouring of the Spirit, which transforms the lives of people and their communities. God made unity in difference possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:6 says that ". . . each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." It does not say that they no longer had their own languages and customs but that they could understand one another.

Accordingly, the Spirit does not so much create the structures and procedures, but rather it breaks open structures that confine and separate people so that they can welcome difference and the challenges and opportunity for new understanding that difference bring. Such a message is doubly important for us today as we experience the growing fear of the different other.

I am aware that here in the USA 'diversity' is a term you use for categories such as people of colour, women, gays and lesbians, etc. Differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, language or culture are not problems to be solved but rather they are important ways of realizing that God's gift of creation will continue.

The conference organisers requested me to particularly talk about "Celebrating our Global Diversity". I want to do this by asking you to accompany me on a round the world tour in 15 minutes. The three wristbands that I am wearing symbolize three areas of diversity that I want to address, namely, Poverty, HIV and Aids, Racism and Power.

First

The white wristband comes from the campaign launched by several organizations and individuals and given momentum by the musician Bono and the Prime Minister of Great Britain Tony Blair. The Campaign was launched about this time last year, during the G8 meeting in Scotland. It reads, " Make Poverty History".

A couple of years ago, I was visiting Thailand and went into a village which looked very much like the African villages that I am familiar with. I had been told that many of the women sex workers in the red district of Bangkok come from villages such as the one I was visiting. It was said that due to poverty, parents in this village sold their children. A young girl about 13 years came to sell some peanuts to me. Through an interpreter I learnt that she had abandoned school because of economic problems and her sick mother was waiting for her to sell the peanuts so that the family can buy some rice. I bought a small packet from her, then watched her the whole day and noticed that nobody bought her nuts and she even could not dare eat any of them herself because they were for income generating for her whole family. I have seen so much poverty all over the world that I can face you and say, without doubt, that poverty kills.

Poor people are not a random cross section of population, because poverty does not come randomly. You are more likely to be poor if you are part of a minority, a person of color, lower caste, indigenous, woman, young and jobless, or a child. According to UNICEF, more than half a billion children live on less than a dollar a day. Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children Defense Fund says that 115 million school age children are not going to school because of poverty.

Poor people lack opportunities to realize their potential. They lack power, influence, voice, and they are extremely vulnerable to sickness, violence and disasters. People who are poor live in a toxic environment, low quality education, and are feared by others. They stand accused of denigrating the values by which 'decent' people live, while claiming rights to benefits they have not worked for. The life of the poor is painted as the hot bed of moral laxity, crime, violence and sexual abuse. Poor people are often branded as dishonest, lazy, addicted to welfare, capable of fraud, and substance abusers. Hence, criminality, hooliganism, theft, mugging, robbery, pick pocketing, and misuses of guns are all named as vices of the poor.

It is easy to victimize the poor because they cannot answer back. But our faith calling asks us to be like Jesus and that means to take sides with the poor. We must then ask bigger questions than what meets the eye. Who is responsible for the most lucrative trade today – which is the trafficking persons and drugs? Are poor people responsible for the global industry of sex slaves, cheap labor and child soldiers? Who is manufacturing and selling arms to nations and to individuals? Small arms are currently one of the highest causes of death in every corner of the world. The mega crimes of our

world do not originate from the poor. Yes, the poor may be used to implement them, but the beneficiaries are big and rich fish who pass for 'decent' people.

It is important that we do not let the realities of wealth and poverty become blurred. We must ask deeper questions in regards to global economic policies. An economic system that promotes only the market, fails to recognise people and the environment and that means that it cannot be sustained. An economy that is mindful of people will always put a face to every priority and decision. The world does not have endless resources, but there is enough for us to share. Every time you run that tap of water and waste gallons of water please remember that in my part of the world, we yearn for just a drop of clean water. Work with us to get clean water. We are intrinsically joined together in one world. We must care for it and we must care for one another. We cannot avoid migrations of people for economic reasons if we don't eradicate poverty.

Every time you cast your ballot for a political leader, be guided by your conscience on how their political stance will impact you and me together. You as Americans must know that the policies made in Washington impact billions of lives in every corner of this planet. Your privilege as the most powerful nation in the world comes with a lot of responsibilities and we ask you individually and collectively to be mindful of our connectedness.

Second

The red wristband reads, "Keep the Promise" and comes from the theme of the World AIDS Day December 1, 2005. One of the differences between many of you here and me is that I know HIV and AIDS in a very personal way. Not only do I come from a continent that has 70% of all people living with the AIDS virus, but also among them are family and friends. My friends and relatives are among those living with the virus and also are counted among the 25 million men, women, and children who have already died from AIDS related illness. I can put a face to AIDS even as I notice that the pandemic continues to defy borders and to define our collective future. Each and every day the world loses another 8,000 lives to the pandemic. Yet the pandemic rages on. Forty-two million people are now living with HIV around the globe, and in addition, it is projected that by the year 2010, HIV will have infected an estimated 100 million people worldwide. Increasingly, it is women and children who are caught in the crossfire. On average, women become infected with HIV and develop AIDS at younger ages than men.

We can do something about this epidemic. The easiest action is to be informed and to protect oneself and each other. We protect our communities and ourselves by being truthful about the global nature of the pandemic and being honest in using the information we have about the pandemic.

The second is to be in solidarity with those infected and affected by providing resources and opportunities for them to live. Anyone who restricts life saving information to people does not have a clue about the reality on the ground. This is an issue of mortality and not just morality. Today we know that the available treatment keeps people alive if taken with good nutrition and knowledge on how to manage oneself. Therefore resources for education, food security and end of violence are not only a means to ending poverty but also of decreasing HIV infections.

In order for us to realize our financial potential we need to have conversation with our wealth as individuals and / or nations. Bill Gates e is making a great deal of positive impact in the world on both HIV and AIDS and Malaria and we can join visionary people like him. It is not so much the amount of money one has, but rather how we relate to the money we have. How do the lives of people who can hardly afford a dollar impact the priorities we make when we allocate resources to our various budgets, be they personal or public?.

At the World YWCA we have made a choice that 60% of all or resources will go to assist communities struggling with AIDS. We support work now in 73 countries and it ranges from training care givers, providing resources to access treatment, educating orphans and advocating for accountability of resources that people give for this pandemic. Recently we developed together with 12 other International Organizations a Code of Accountability because we are aware that sometimes funds given for good causes get squandered by corrupt people. I urge you to be diligent in ensuring that your funds are put to good use but do not grow weary of giving to AIDS related causes. This pandemic is still running wild like bush fire in a dry summer. We have a long haul to go. Do not permit apathy and fatigue to grip you.

I am actively involved in the advocacy for HIV and AIDS through various groups, among them the UNAIDS recently formed Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. We advocate for more money in AIDS programmes for women, allocating more seats for women at the decision making tables and securing women's human rights and dignity.

The World YWCA, in partnership with other international organisations, will convene an unprecedented international conference on women's leadership on HIV and AIDS. The International Women's Summit (IWS) will take place from 4 to 7 July 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya, in conjunction with its World Council meeting. The conference will bring together 1500 women of all ages and HIV statuses and other stakeholders. It will feature a wide range of activities and sessions and exceptional speakers to celebrate and expand the power of women's leadership. This summit will further build our skills, strategize how we can strengthen existing partnerships and create new networks in order to mobilise the changes needed to reverse the global HIV pandemic on women and girls at all levels. You can make this meeting your place to learn more about HIV and AIDS and to meet women who are living positively with the virus. Take this as a personal invitation and check our website for more information (www.worldywca.org)

This leads me to the third area of diversity that I will address tonight.

Third

The orange wristband reads, "Eliminating Racism and Empowering Women". This come from the YWCA of the USA and it articulates the vision of our movement in this country. Here in the USA, the YWCA was at the forefront of efforts to break barriers that kept women and people of color out of schools, voting booths, and the corner office. The legendary Dr. Dorothy Heights known throughout this country, for many years sustained the policy on the elimination of racism. Today this continues to be a hallmark programme of the YWCA of the USA. Racism is perhaps one of the hardest diversities to address because it is not just about the colour of the skin, but it is mostly about power. The poster of United Nations on the International Human Rights Day, 10th December read: "It is not wrong to be different, it is wrong to be treated differently if you are."

Around the world, currently our racist instincts, which we all have, are ignited by FEAR. Fear of visible difference and diversity nourishes hopelessness, apathy, despair or violence. The current global fear of muslim people is not a solution to terrorism or insecurity. We cannot afford to subscribe to a way of thinking that puts people in boxes of the evil and the good. Yes, we must not condone evil practices such as killing and murdering, but we must be cautious in not letting the fear of other people influence our identification of the perpetrators of evil.

I suggest that we should draw strength from the women's movement that has been trying for centuries to organise and mobilize across differences.

Women have often gathered to engage in actions on behalf of others. It could be raising funds for charity, giving care to the needy or campaigning for an issue of community concern. Women's actions are about falling into passion with principles that lead to compassion. Principles are not substitutes to passion. 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, fairness and to be consistent so that we do not become ambiguous in the way that we act.

Addressing racism requires us to call upon these skills that we have invested for centuries as women in developing trust across differences. When the world is being immobilised by fear we should use our reserves of trust and be bold in our actions of peace making and empowering others around us. The future is about working together and living together across borders and around the world. This we can do. And...

Finally

We must celebrate courage to hope. I shift from the wristband and draw your attention to Africa my beloved continent.

Some of you will perhaps ask how we in Africa sustain hope when so much is happening to us. Let me tell you how. Come with me to Mozambique, the Southern tip of the African continent. Think of the African woman who gave birth on a tree during the floods in March 2000. Can you imagine a pregnant woman spending five days on a tree, going in labour and giving birth to a baby and then clinging to a rope with her baby to be rescued on a helicopter? What do you call this? I call it stubborn spirituality of hope. It is a spirituality of not giving up. Such spirituality hopes all things and believes all things. It is rooted in the hope that we can change our destiny if only we are given one more opportunity. Otherwise why would a woman of Africa go to the extent of wanting to give birth to a child who may in fact die from malnutrition, AIDS or malaria or even get bilharzias in the same flood water from which she is seeking to be rescued!

The baby born on the tree was named Rosewitha Chingedza. Rosewitha Chingedza is now six years old. CNN recently brought her back to the world in a feature that showed that Rosewitha has survived odds of childhood vulnerability. She is going to school, and the way she came to the world attracted notice and so she has support to grow up as a healthy girl. I meet many children whom I equate to Rosewitha. I name them "Hope." They grow up in a dangerous world but they are sustained by hope and God's grace.

We must use our collective power to give hope to the World. We can do so if we claim the promise of hope that is ever present in our faith heritage. Hope is the refusal to accept a desperate reading of reality and the belief that reality can be changed for the better. Hope therefore is resistance. Hope is to be lived out. To hope for justice and peace is to work for elimination of injustice and to be a peacemaker.

In God's grace lets us celebrate the hope that is within us. Amen.