

**Address of The Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi
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2005 E.H. Johnson Award Recipient
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Christian Witness in an Interfaith and Multicultural World

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

It is an honour to receive this year’s E.H. Johnson Award. Given what Rev. E.H. Johnson stood for and the impact he made in his lifetime as well as the list of past recipients of the award, I am humbled that the Committee would think of me as the recipient of the 2005 award. I can only hope that together we can make a difference in stimulating new commitments and actions on the cutting edge of mission today. The current socio-political realities in our world, in addition to our timeless calling to be engaged in mission, make this a very urgent need. I accept this award on behalf of all those inside and outside WARC member churches – many of them unsung heroes, women and men, young and old, who are faithfully engaged on the cutting edge of mission.

Today, there is no doubt that any serious mission engagement has to take into account pluralistic faith and cultural contexts. This has in fact been the nature of the church right from the beginning. According to the Acts of Apostles, the last recorded words of our Lord Jesus Christ before he physically left this world and ascended into heaven had this call which envisaged a church which has a mission in multiple contexts. The church has since then throughout history been struggling to live out its response to this call.

From those beginnings, engaging in this mission has meant operating as a minority in the middle of people of other faiths. The early apostles found themselves as a minority in the midst of a people whose faith led them not to accept our Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Then when the message began spreading beyond Jerusalem and Judea, we come face to face with the reality of doing mission in Hellenistic faith and cultural contexts. Take for example the encounter of Paul and Silas with the people of Greece (Acts 17). We are given a detailed account of Paul’s ministry in Athens – that particular pluralistic context (Acts 17:16-31). In its mission engagement, the church has therefore been witnessing in interfaith and multicultural communities for the last two thousand years.

In the last several centuries Western Europe and North America have become predominately Christian. It is only in the last few decades that this dominance has been broken in significant ways by the emergence of people from different faiths – Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, etc. In this country, Canada, you are used to the indigenous religions of the people of the First Nations. The reality of many contexts is that living among people of other faiths is quite common. African Christians live among adherents of African traditional religions and Muslims for the most part. In Asia, Christians have lived as minorities among Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and people of other faiths for ages.

Today, there is increased consciousness everywhere that we live in pluralistic communities. This consciousness has been sharpened as we experience the manipulation of religion and religious sentiments to fulfill political agendas. Sometimes this manipulation results in very serious

consequences, as for example in the interfaith related violence occurring in parts of Indonesia or as associated by some people to the September 11, 2001 attacks in the USA.

The question is – What does it mean to be witnesses for our Lord Jesus Christ in this kind of world? The response to this question needs to take into account six factors.

1. The call to be witnesses is not negated simply because we live in pluralistic contexts.
2. The early apostles operated in a manner that respected the people of different cultures and of other faiths.
3. Dialogue is important – the main aim being to understand one another and the resources we bring from our different perspectives to address common issues we face in our communities.
4. Dialogue does not necessarily mean compromising or denying our own faith.
5. Dialogue includes commitment to understanding ourselves and what our faith calls us to do, and willingness to listen to the other and what their faith calls them to do.
6. We cannot with integrity work hard at dialogue without working hard at healing divisions among ourselves – Reformed and Christians in general. This in itself is important witness.

Let us take each of these one by one.

1. We are indeed called to be witnesses. The missionaries who came to my part of the world in the 19th century knew very well they were coming to a cultural context different from their own, but they came anyway. Their success very much can be correlated with their ability to be in dialogue with the indigenous people as they expressed themselves in their cultures and on the basis of their traditional beliefs. They learned our language and learned to communicate with people about faith. Yes, they also made mistakes, which included in many cases disrespect for the culture and faith of the people. These mistakes were hindrances to their witnessing which continue to affect Christian witness today. I am sure there are many parallels in the Canadian context vis-à-vis the First Nations people. Today, as a result of those mistakes, some people question the need for evangelism in pluralistic contexts. To “throw away the baby with the bath water” would be a denial of our faith and calling as Christians. Churches in Africa, for example, attach much importance to fulfilling our evangelistic calling. Our challenge is to prayerfully discover effective meaningful ways of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ today.
2. To do this we have good examples in the apostles. Acts chapter 17, quoted earlier, is always a challenge to me. Here was Paul and Silas in a strange cultural and religious context different from their own, and they had every reason to condemn “those heathens”. But they found a way of acknowledging something in that difference which they could relate to and use as a reference point to proclaim the good news. This could only come from a profound respect for the culture they found themselves ministering in. How respectful are we of other cultures and other faiths today?
3. Dialogue with people of other faiths is very important. Many people assume that dialogue aims at fusing the different dogmas together and trying to engage in a conversation of compromises and recanting of doctrinal positions which seem offensive to the other. This can yield a phony kind of “anything goes religion” which is not faithful or respectful of any of the religions. This definitely is not the goal of dialogue. Dialogue does involve listening and talking with the other with the aim of understanding the other’s religious tenets. It often means drawing from our different religious resources to address common problems in the community – economic, gender or environmental injustice, devastating diseases, conflicts and wars, etc.

4. So we can conclude indeed that dialogue does not necessarily mean compromising on our faith. On the contrary, the more I understand my faith and take it seriously, the more I can bring myself into dialogue with persons of other faiths. Key elements of Christian faith, as affirmed by the Reformed tradition, such as the sovereignty of God, the belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as the means through which salvation is obtained by grace, Sola Scriptura – the Bible as the only source of our knowledge, etc., cannot be compromised. However, it is in relating to God through Jesus Christ that we also acquire the value for hospitality, and in which we affirm the value Jesus placed on dialogue with persons who were regarded as unfit for dialogue by the religious leaders of the day.
5. That self-understanding entails a fresh commitment to the mission we have been called to. This message includes evangelism as well as being agents of transformation in our communities. If we are excited about the meaningful life that we have received in Jesus Christ, we cannot be bashful about sharing it with others. We are called to invite others to taste the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to watch the methods of our evangelism. Some past flaws such as manipulating others, frightening them, or using our economic or political power to force others to believe in the Lord Jesus have to give way to methodologies closer to images of the Bible. At the same time, attention only to the “soul” in our proclamation may be only a partial fulfillment of our mandate. How can we be the salt and light of our communities, and make disciples who themselves participate in being the salt and light of our communities? We live in broken communities where race relationships, economic injustices, violence, etc., have become rampant. How are we engaged in our mission of being agents of transformation? These are some of the things our faith calls us to do. We need to understand this. Then how can we understand what the Muslim’s faith calls him/her to do? How can we talk about these together with integrity?
6. As we engage in mission today, we need to pay attention to the divisions within the Christian family and the divisive ways in which we engage in mission. Some people may be very good in dialogue with persons of other faiths, but have problems cooperating with other churches. The Reformed family has a notorious reputation for divisions. In some countries we have several Presbyterian churches – often a result of bitter divisions. Our mission in the pluralistic world of today will lose integrity if we do not pay attention to healing our divisions, and finding ways of engaging in mission together. I like what Canada has done for many years in terms of the different ecumenical coalitions.

To conclude, let me offer a few suggestions. These are not “how to’s”. I want to refrain from posturing as someone who has all the answers that I will then impose on you. Rather, I hope that what I have said so far and the following related points will stimulate each of us to continue searching for the practical things we can do in effective mission in our contexts today.

Our daily experiences indicate that all of us are in pluralistic contexts today. The Presbyterian Church in Canada as a living church can see that as an opportunity to engage in mission in a different manner. We are called to be effective witnesses in these multicultural and multi-faith contexts. Maybe it is a disadvantage to be the dominant religion.

For effective witnessing in the world today we have to recognize the danger in enjoying a privileged status as the dominant majority in any community. Maybe for that reason it is good that we now operate in pluralistic contexts. We need to make a shift in our mentality to become effective people who are sometimes in the minority. In fact, even if Christianity is the majority religion, often those who

are engaged in prophetic action as God's instruments of transformation are in the minority. Therefore, having a mentality of being in the minority can be helpful. As effective minorities, we can have a more realistic appraisal of ourselves – knowing that what we proclaim can have a transforming impact on the world – but will not be easy to embrace by the majority of people. Our calling is to model our message. It also calls on us to find ways of being in dialogue with non-Christian neighbours with whom we live in our communities. Avoiding this will simply be burying our heads in the sand while there are challenges to be faced.

The scandal of divisions, which I pointed to, is heightened when viewed in the light of the pluralistic communities in which we find ourselves. These pluralistic contexts demonstrate the harm that divisive tendencies can have. Pluralistic contexts pose challenges, but can also be seen as an opportunity rather than as a threat. Since September 11, 2001, there have been some interesting trends in Christian attitudes towards other faiths. On the one hand, there has been an increase in calls towards dialogue and building understanding with other religions – especially Islam. On the other hand, some Christian communities have felt an increased need to be fortified against other religions – especially Islam. These trends are set against a world context which increasingly polarizes people against one another and increases insecurity, slowly driving us towards the survival of the fittest. In such a world, a major question I raise for all Christian communities is “What constitutes Christian witness?” To add to the polarization, or to work with our Lord and Saviour towards building peace and reconciliation? If it is the latter, then what are the critical reflections and actions that churches ought to engage in vis-à-vis communities and people of other faiths? As I have said earlier, these questions lead us to dialogue with communities of other faiths, and the dialogues do not have to imply compromising what we believe and confess as our faith. It helps us build bridges for peace and healing as people who live together in the same communities.

Today, Christian Mission can be found in the leadership of churches joining hands with Muslim and Jewish leaders in seeking to address together from their different faith perspectives some common community problems – violence, economy, disease, etc. The World Conference of Religions for Peace, to which Rev. E.H. Johnson gave much leadership in his later years, provides such an instrument at the global level with expressions in different countries in the world. It continues to be a leading agent of transformation with which I am proud to be associated as one of its Presidents. Its actions in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and other parts of the world contribute to peace building utilizing resources from different religions.

How about evangelism? Is that something that is to be seen as negative and discarded in favour of something which does not look so offensive to people of other faiths? I don't think so. I don't think it is authentic for a person from any faith to feel they have to deny who they are in order to live in a “politically correct” manner with people of different faiths. That would be false. Christianity is an evangelistic faith which includes presenting the good news of Salvation in Jesus Christ to people. People who are excited about the salvation they have experienced should not be afraid to share this good news by word or by their actions. However, the manner in which such good news is shared can be problematic. Even for a good cause, using threats, economic or political power, manipulation, disrespect or any other means to push the good news down the throat of people of other faiths is not consonant with the Source of this good news who says, “I came so that they might have life and have it in fullness”. Evangelism is different from indoctrination. Even in the multicultural communities in which we find ourselves, I wish many more Christians were so excited about the difference our faith makes in our lives that it would show in our relationships and our actions. I wish how our faith equips us to be committed to being God's instruments of transformation in this broken world would lead to words and

actions that not only challenge the forces of evil, but also inspire others to want to respond to the invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ to come and taste of the life He offers.

We do live in exciting times. The calling to be effective witnesses in these times is even more urgent. My prayer is that each of us will be diligent in our prayer that God will equip us and help us be effective witnesses – agents of transformation in our communities.

Thank you.