

## **The Shape of God to Come and the Future of Humanity.**

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Suppose we were able to identify which attributes should comprise a God to respond to the needs of our world today, for instance peace, love, globalisation, social justice, gender equality, sustainable development, security, and hope. Where would our search take us? Within the past three decades, the peoples of the world have found for themselves new ways of walking and working together in order to respond to the human needs. As a result of knowledge and expanded consciousness of the variety of religious and social expressions of the world's people, people are discarding yesterday's limited exclusiveness and seeking for answers together. Social movements have become central to the search for truth and therein, implicit is also the search for God. Letty Russell in her book The Church in the Round<sup>1</sup> describes 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. Women have been at the margins of the church and society for so long such that they have learnt to be "in the round". Since 1988, I have been working with women in church and in society. Women in different contexts and locations are demonstrating how faith informs struggles for justice and how struggles for justice inform faith. My reflections in this paper speak to this experience.

We live in very contradicting times. On the one hand we can look back even only three decades ago and note huge achievements and advancement in science technology, religion, arts academics, research, finance, communication, advocacy and human development. On the other hand, the achievements seem minor compared to the contradictions of poverty and affluence; international exploitation and local indifference; health, HIV and AIDS, the destruction of the environment; feminised poverty and western industrialized nation's privilege! We experience these contradictions through conflicts of every type around ownership of rights and voice.

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

Our world is one of enormous and troubling inequities. One billion of the world's six billion people own 80% of global gross domestic product while another billion struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day. We live in a world of misplaced priorities, a world in which rich countries spend \$56 billion a year on development assistance, \$300 billion on agricultural subsidies and \$600 billion on defense. Even poor countries spend some \$200 billion a year on defense significantly non-comparable to what they spend on education. In our world today, industrialized countries frequently advocate free trade yet often adopt high domestic subsidies and other trade barriers, which effectively preclude poor countries from competing fairly in the international market. Even developing countries hamper their own growth by instituting high south-south tariffs.

As if that was not enough, the AIDS pandemic is defining our future. The global AIDS pandemic has already claimed the lives of 25 million men, women, and children, and each and every day the world loses another 8,000 lives. Yet the pandemic rages on. Forty-two million people are now living with HIV around the globe, (26.6 million are in Africa) and in addition, it is projected that by 2010, an estimated 100 million people will have been infected by HIV/AIDS worldwide. Increasingly, it is women and children who are caught in the crossfire. Globally, more than half of those now living with HIV are women and, and women make half of humanity. In many hard hit countries on the African continent where 64% of all people living with HIV and AIDS reside, infection rates among teen girls are five times that of teen boys. On average, women become infected with HIV and develop AIDS at younger ages than men.<sup>2</sup>

The gap is too great even symbolically between Porto Alegre where voices of communities affected gather for their agenda and Davos where those who determine the paths of globalisation gather for a seemingly different agenda. Truthfully as long as we live on one planet, we are obliged to build bridges or else the future will remain turbulent. How do we build bridges? First we must recognize the signs of our times and consider this as the opportune time to seek a different way of constructing and

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<sup>2</sup> UNAIDS PCB(15)/04.2, 18 May 2004. Unpublished Manuscript Report of the Executive Director.

managing the economy. An economic theory, which promotes only the market, fails to recognise people and nature, which are the only tenets that can sustain our planet and promote life. An economy that respects the natural laws of creation is conscious of limitations. An economy that is mindful of people will always put a face to every priority and decision.

Christian activists believe in a God who is not aloof from human affairs, whose reality is grounded in the daily struggles of a people in the quest of peace, but not without justice. The presence of this God is imminent, sometimes in the silence and sometimes in the cries of the poor and the excluded. Even though the world in which we live is broken and wounded, God does not tire of mending it. Perhaps we could borrow a page from the Jesus manifesto which we often cite and recite from Luke 4: 16-19. According to Jesus, the spirit of God inspired the creative yet controversial actions he took to give hope to those he met regardless of the consequences. According to Jesus, the concern of the Spirit of God was to speak for the poor, for the victims of cruelty and systematic injustices, for prisoners, the disabled, the sick and those locked out of any meaningful participation in society by bars of ignorance. The concern of the God of Jesus was particularly for people in whom all hope had been crushed – who felt consigned to long days and even longer nights of quiet desolation and despair. According to Jesus, the concern of the Spirit was to motivate people to share the good news with these forgotten ones. The commitment of the Spirit was to motivate people to have a passionate compassion - to be prepared to struggle in solidarity with them for release from all personal, social and political forces that would debilitate them if left and abandoned on their own. The goal of the compassion is to set them free to realize their potential, to be fully human and fully alive, as members of the human community, persons of dignity, persons who can claim the ownership of abundant life.

Perhaps we can get from here to the future by living and acting in sympathy with this God of Jesus. The essence of being a Christian is to live and act in sympathy with God's Spirit as Jesus did. This implies that we have to be known for keeping the company of beggars, thieves, prostitutes, tax collectors in whatever names and forms that they come to us today. We must also take option in favour of the poor.

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 of lower caste, indigenous, black, woman or under 18 years of age. 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 with toxic environment, crime, low quality education, and are feared by others. They stand accused of flaunting 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, sexual abuse, loose marital ties and neglect of parental duties. Poor people are often branded as dishonest, lazy, addicted to welfare, capable of fraud, corruption, bribe, vice, drug addiction, alcoholism and substance abuse, criminality, youth hooliganism, theft, mugging, robbery, pick pocketing, etc.

This makes the realities of poverty less visible to better off persons who may see these effects as crimes of the poor and advocate for policies to victimize and punish them. The cost of eradicating poverty was once estimated at a mere 1% of global income, that is about 80 billion. (Human Development Report 1997, UNDP.) In June 2004, the USA congress approved US\$ 87 billion dollars as additional money to be spent on the war in Iraq. It is about time that we stopped worrying about poverty and began to worry about wealth and the harm it is doing to our world.

The secular world of the Social Forum is a field for sharing the experience of the variety of the poor of our times. At the World Social Forum the privilege of rallying together with struggling communities such as people living with HIV and AIDS, gay and lesbian people, stateless people, landless people, indigenous people, refugees, women and youth give us a glimpse of what Jesus must have felt in keeping company with the marginalized and poor of his time. More than anything the World Social Forum is about building bridges and creating working partnerships. The Social Forum is not a space to agree on ideologies, but rather to create synergies on particular issues. It is the space for cementing the partnerships for common good. It is not possible to attain sustainable development or curb the spread of HIV and AIDS without women and men working together. Women and men have all along struggled

together for the abolition of slavery, the liberation of countries from colonialism, dismantling of apartheid and are struggling together in their longing for peace. It is now the turn of men to join women in their struggle for equality. If women and men have to bring this world safely and successfully into the future, we must ensure that children and young people are also included.

The inclusive openness of the Social Forum means that anyone can attend if they have the resources to get there. This kind of hospitality speaks words of hope to people by allowing courage, wisdom and resistance to hold hands and celebrate the power of collective actions. Hope is a fragile quality that is quickly destroyed by any feelings of powerlessness or self-doubt. Social indifference and cultural obligations can bind body, mind and soul in such a way that hope is squeezed out and the result is immediate shrinking. Unless powerlessness is addressed, today's hope will be tomorrow's despair. The success of the social movements can be judged by how they help people take control over their own lives. The capacity for people to manage themselves develops quite unobtrusively when it is accompanied with positive care and affirmation through respectful relationships. Mutual sharing of strength and vulnerabilities creates condition for sustainable partnerships. Encouraging people to renounce lies and embrace truth about them can be difficult and frustrating, but that is the essence of creating networks and organised groups where participants find the safety of being in companionship of others with similar beliefs and experiences. In these places people become empowered by hearing each other's stories. Most instances of empowerment are not instantaneous. But whether the process is short and immediate or long and tedious, the essence of empowerment entails renunciation of lies and speaking the truth about oneself and the world in which we live. The immediate indicator of empowerment is the move from despair to hope. Hope is the belief that another world is possible.

Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality, and the belief that reality can be changed for the better. Hope therefore is resistance. It actively resists the void of hopelessness by working for alternatives and living in faith. Thus hope is not merely an intellectual frame of mind. Hope is to be lived out. To hope for justice and peace is

to work for elimination of injustice and to be a peacemaker. To hope for democracy means to practice being democratic in our personal relationships. To hope for wholeness means to face our own lack of wholeness with courage and to be prepared to go through the pain of self-examination, which leads to change. But the certainty of the Christian hope alone does not bring transformation and food to the table nor does it remove despair from a patient dying of cancer or AIDS. The task of communicating hope is about helping people to live in hope as they work out their issues and to learn to live positively with conditions they cannot change. Again and again we are learning from people living positively with AIDS that hope does not always change the condition but it must change also the psyche.

The lives and stories of women convince me that another world is possible. Women have broken the silence on their oppression and violence, they have accessed education that was denied to them, and they continue to struggle to better access health care, economical stability, environmental security, and human rights for themselves and their communities and families. Women have created shifts in the societal attitudes to females, claimed their space in leadership and decision making and through their determination they have changed the very nature of human society including religious dogma. Women have accomplished this critical agenda using a variety of creative methods, organizing for solidarity and mutual support, all in the belief that it is possible to make the difference. Women have done this with limited resources, while continuing to work as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters, career women, public servants, educators etc. Women have spent the last several decades building trust as a base for the women's movement often under difficult and challenging conditions.

I am filled with hope and energized by the vision of women across the globe working together to meet those challenges. Why? Because they have shown that justice delayed is justice denied and resistance to injustice is a holy act of prayer. The story of the persistent woman in Luke 18:1-8, is one of the Bible stories that motivates me in my journey together with others who believe that another world is possible. This story has been used to illustrate Jesus' teaching to his disciples about persistent prayer. But when one reads the story through, one is struck by the fact that persistent

prayer is a right-based search for justice. The story illustrates very clearly that justice has to be demanded. Justice does not become obsolete in time. The way to correct injustice is to provide justice. Persistence in search for justice is rooted in belief that another world is possible. Women of the Bible, women of the church, women of the world inspire me to believe that another world is possible.

The women's movement is the largest organised peoples' movement in the world. Women in their search for affirmation have often underlined the principles of equality, participation and reciprocity. Words such as partnership, community, and togetherness are key to women's conversations. As women talked to one another, we began to discover that our individual experiences of discrimination, triviality, abuse and distortion were not unique to particular women but were indeed universal to women everywhere and in every generation. We found a common ground in hearing the collective story of women's experiences articulated in different contexts and times and yet speaking to the same issues. It is the collective story of womanhood, which provided a crucial entry point to women's determination to pursue a space where other possibilities can be experienced. Women's social analysis has provided both the therapy we need to heal from our past and also given us the possibility to use our collective knowledge to change our lives, our socialization, our belief systems and to challenge the teaching we receive from our families, our religions and our societies. Connecting and networking are words that we use to support each other and to build global solidarity.

In the process of listening to each other's stories, we have discovered common themes and trends, but we have also been uncomfortably confronted with differences and sharp distinctions. Our experiences are similar but they are not homogeneous. We are shaped by very different geographical, historical and social contexts. These in effect determine borders based on economics, race/culture/caste, politics, religion, generation, sexuality, education, health, access to information and the lists go on. The credibility of women's story is continually challenged by how we acknowledge and manage these differences without being trapped into helplessness, powerlessness, apathy and isolationism.

Women's actions are about falling into passion with principles that lead us 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. In following the Jesus way we are reminded again and again that in our compassion for others, we must exercise the principle of justice and fairness for all people, not just to some. We must think of the others, not just us. Justice is not "just us". Justice is universal and it does not respect religion, gender, race, geography and anything else that we can name which distorts the universality of justice.

A church of the future will devote its energy to celebrating the tremendous power that can be manifested when the Spirit of God descends upon us, allowing a combination of women, wisdom and hope to gather in one place and to speak to the church and to the world through actions of social justice. It is our courage, determination and hope that can propel the church into such a future. It is our energy expended spiritually, physically and intellectually that keeps the candles of hope burning into the future. As the UNICEF report says:

"The day will come when Nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength, not by the splendor of their cities and capital cities, but by the well being of their peoples; by their levels of health, nutrition, and education; by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labors; by their ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; by the respect that is shown for their civil and political liberties; by the provision that is made for those that are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by the protection that is accorded to the growing minds and bodies of their children."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Progress of the Nations. 2000 UNICEF REPORT, page 1*

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### Executive Summary

Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro is the General Secretary, (CEO) of World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA), the largest and oldest women's ecumenical movement serving 25 million women and girls in 122 countries. She has more than two decades of international experience in working with Non Governmental Organizations, (NGO's), Churches, and Ecumenical Institutions on a wide variety of issues, including Social and Economic Development, Organizational Development, Human Resources and Leadership Development. She has provided various aspects of leadership in the preparation and implementation of major UN conferences including the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. She serves on three major committees of the UNAIDS. During her leadership, the World YWCA has made HIV/AIDS a priority programme. Musimbi Kanyoro also serves on a number of Ecumenical, and NGOs Boards and is the current president of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) with headquarters in London.

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