

Opening Keynote

For RiverRunning, November 2009, University of Winnipeg

Katalina Tahaafe-Williams

*Malo e lelei!*¹ [Allow me a few minutes to pay my respect to the Indigenous peoples of this land, asking permission for me to speak]. *Fakatapu kihe hou'eiki, fanau moe fanga makapuna 'oe kainga Ojibwe, kainga Cree, kainga Inuktitut, moe kainga Mikmag. Talangata 'iate au 'o fai ki tu'a kae 'ata mo'oku 'ae faingamalie ko'eni kete fakahoko 'ae fatoniga lea fakaava 'oe konifelenisi mahu'inga ko'eni, 'aia kuo tuku kohoku koloa pea 'oku te tu'u ke tali moe fakafeta'i.*

It seems to me quite appropriate that we are gathered here in Winnipeg for this important intercultural conference, given its location at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. It is, however, a bit worrying that the word *Winnipeg* in Cree means “muddy waters”! I mean, we have here John of Patmos describing the river of the water of life as “bright [and presumably clear] as crystal.” I was thinking that if *crystal clear water* is a marker for the river of the water of life in heaven, then I’m afraid that rules out Lake Winnipeg as the river of life, and further, that rules out Winnipeg as heaven. Really sorry, folks! I guess you will all just have to come over to the Pacific Isles to find heaven and possibly, not a river, but instead a vast and crystal clear ocean of life!

Mind you, my 14-year-old daughter, Lilliani, thinks Winnipeg must be the closest thing to heaven as it is the home of Winnie the Pooh, whom she loves dearly. She was very upset that I get to come to the homeland of Winnie the Pooh without her.

Water is quite a dominant image in the collective and individual psyche of Pacific Island peoples, but water in terms of *ocean*, which has an overwhelming sense of vastness about it. In that context, water is both a unifying and separating/distancing imagery. Water can also be a threatening image, with the very real threats of tsunamis and islands disappearing under the ocean.

Nevertheless, the Pacific Ocean and its waters unite not only the Pacific Peoples but also connects them to Latin America to the east, North America to the north, Asia to the northwest, Australia to the west, and New Zealand to the southwest. Indeed, I’ve travelled a long distance to be here with you. But it is deeply comforting to know that there is a very real connection between you here in Canada and my people back in the Pacific Isles and in Australia, through this vast expanse of water.

So here we are once again, gathered as the richly diverse peoples of God in The United Church of Canada, gathered at “the Forks,” a resonance of the gathering of the nations and tribes and peoples and languages beside the river of life, come to reaffirm the reality that we are the multicultural and baptized peoples of Christ. We are here because we long to be part of God’s vision of a truly intercultural United Church of Canada. We are here because the vision and hope of the New

¹ “Greetings” in my mother tongue which is Tongan (Pacific Island language) and literally translates “Thank you for being well.” A formal part of Tongan oratory protocol is to pay respect to the people of the land and ask their permission to speak, so the rest of this opening paragraph in Tongan is doing just that.

Jerusalem is our hope too. We long to see the river of life flow through our cities and the tree of life giving life in abundance to all. We are here because we know that our families, churches, communities—indeed our nations—desperately need the healing powers of the leaves of the tree of life. We are here because we wish to make real that harmony that is God’s will for humanity!

John’s vision in Revelation 22:1–5 is rich with baptismal and eucharistic images. It fills our senses with the eschatological themes of a New Jerusalem, a transformed reality, a new world for all. This is life-giving vision at its best. This passage leaves the reader bubbling with energy and optimism. It is hopeful and uplifting. It is profound and inspiring. But Nestor Miguez² reminds us that these words were written for, and read to, oppressed and persecuted Christians living under Roman rule and domination. Yes, indeed, from this perspective, John’s vision may also be seen as a subversive challenge to the Roman Empire, which Justo Gonzalez describes as “the great harlot sitting on many waters.”³

But what does this vision mean for us Christians in the first decade of the 21st century? Against this background of eucharistic and eschatological images, what might this vision be saying to The United Church of Canada today? Last year we gathered for Behold in Toronto, guided by the passage from Rev 21:1–5. At Behold I did and said many things that I probably shouldn’t have—but do not worry, I shall resist quoting Socrates and Kant to you this time. There in Toronto I made the case that the new heaven and new earth in John’s vision is God’s intercultural future revealed to us.⁴ I made the case for the biblical and theological foundations of the intercultural community of Christ that God in John’s vision is inviting us to be part of. I made the point that from its very inception at Pentecost the Church of Christ was multicultural and multilingual, and that being multicultural was written into the Christian DNA.

This time we are gathered here in Winnipeg under the theme RiverRunning, inspired by John’s vision in Rev 22:1–5, which again for me is an affirmation of that truly intercultural future God desires for us. John’s vision here is giving us a picture of what God’s kin-dom building church for the 21st century should look like: A place where all the diverse peoples of the earth can find affirmation and belonging; a place where all nations can find life-giving water and food; a place where difference is seen as an enriching character rather than a diminishing influence. I suggest to you that this vision of John’s is ultimately about what it means to be Christ’s body in the world today! And we, you and I, regular ordinary Christian folks like us, we are the body of Christ!

We need look no further for the means to make God’s intercultural vision for us a reality for our families, communities, churches, society, indeed our world. We need to take seriously what it means to be proactive agents for change. It means we have the responsibility and yes the power to make those changes. We have the power given to us by Christ himself—*Behold, behold I make all things new, beginning with you and starting from today! Behold, behold, I make all things new my promise is true for I am Christ the way!*

² N O Miguez, 2000, *Plurality, Power and Mission: Intercontextual Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium*, P Wickeri, J Wickeri, D M A Niles (eds), London:CWM

³ *For the Healing of the Nations*, Justo Gonzalez, p.80

⁴ A hard copy of my opening address at Behold 2008 may be requested from the intercultural team at the United Church offices in Toronto.

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At the end of last month, I led worship at one of our chapel services at UTC. I realized that Reformation Day and All Saints' Day were both to fall on that coming weekend and decided to preach on the lectionary for those two significant days. One of the readings happened to be Rev. 21:1–6.

Reformation Day is an opportunity to be reminded once again that although the church/body of Christ on earth is comprised of corruptible people just like you and me, God still calls us to be active agents for the renewal of God's church and world. Reformation Day holds us true to the reformed principle and tradition of *reformata et semper reformanda* (reformed and always being reformed). Knowing our fallible human nature, we are nevertheless empowered to respond to God's call to renewal of ourselves and our churches, for ours is a faith rooted in the conviction that Christ's transformative power can, and continues to, renew us, the church. Even as the church is in need of constant renewal, so it is still the home of people like us who attempt to live our lives with integrity, and to be active witnesses to God's new heaven and new earth in the way that we live.

All Saints' Day also reminds us that as fallible and corruptible as we are, we do still carry a saintly spark within us. Yes, we have the capacity to corrupt the church/body of Christ, but as moral beings we also have the potential to make real God's vision of a new creation. We are reminded that in the NT, the word *hagios*/holy/saint is often used to refer to all believers—to all folks like us. We are reminded that the “saints” and the “holy” are all those who had been made holy by Jesus Christ and consecrated for God's service. That saintly spark within us is our impetus for renewal and transformation of ourselves, our church, our world.

So we, you and I, the sinner-saints, are called and we must respond. We are the body of Christ for the world today and we must be courageous. We must not shy away. You are the body of Christ for Canada today and I suggest that your only response is to stand up and say: “Here I am Lord, send me!”

At Behold! last year I spoke about God's intercultural reality as a given, except that our churches and the majority of our fellow members are not yet well equipped to participate in that reality.

I spoke about the gospel imperative for the truly intercultural church of Christ to be one that is racially just and where racial equality is normative; where intercultural ministry is a core ministry in its life and witness, not treated as some kind of special-interest-group ministry, for to treat it as such reflects a grave misconception that has a defining impact on that church's response to God's call to mission, on how it shapes its ministries, and how its resources are allocated!

I spoke about my conviction that the truly intercultural and inclusive community of Christ is about the very wellbeing of the body of Christ that we are! For when the hands are cut off the whole body is affected, when the head is injured the whole body suffers!

The intercultural church is interculturally literate! That means we do not wait for children and young people to join us before we make our church buildings children/youth-friendly and our services relevant; we do not wait for people who are physically handicapped to join us before we make our worship spaces accessible to them; we do not wait for the Aboriginal First Nation peoples to join us before we pay our respect acknowledging their ownership of this land from time

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immemorial, or utilize Indigenous languages like Ojibwe and Cree in our worship services; we do not wait for people of Filipino origins to join us before we pray in Tagalog, or for Chinese Canadians to join us before we sing in Mandarin, or for Winnipeggers of Germanic origin to join us before we learn to pass the Lord's peace in German! In this day and age we cannot afford to sink into more entrenched monoculturalism!

The multitudes from all nations and languages are all already here! It is God's reality here and now! And it is our job to ensure that as the body of Christ we are, we do live into that reality! We do manifest that rich diversity in our very being and existence. Other than that, we are not a true reflection of the Creator God whose image we are. Even simple welcoming signs in and around our churches in the different languages that are currently spoken in the society will go a long way!

I spoke about the importance of a well-informed membership as an important characteristic for an intercultural church. Our churches and communities are filled with good people, but not enough who are well informed! When ignorance is coupled with prejudice, too many good people allow too many bad things to go unchallenged. A well-informed intercultural church makes for a confident, passionate, motivated community that embraces healthy self-questioning and the critique of ideas and information.

Being well informed involves, among other things, knowing our own histories and each other's. It is sobering but sad to admit that we live in a world filled with masses of uninformed humanity. Moreover, many of our national leadership are not often very well informed people themselves. This kind of *en masse* ignorance is especially deadly in our Western context, for it is rooted not so much in a lack of resources, but more in a form of arrogance fueled by a collective sense of cultural superiority that comes with being world dominant!

This is a great irony given that we live in an age characterized by instantaneous communication and advanced information technology!

Our technological and consumerist powers grow daily while our moral convictions grow ever more hesitant and confused, and our ability to analyze and critique massive and often trivial amounts of information diminishes.

When I pick up a newspaper or turn on the television in Sydney, LA, or London, I am often catatonic with helpless rage, fed up to my core at being inundated with arrogant, misinformed, biased, insular, parochial drivel! The kind of drivel that arbitrarily demonizes the "other" without ever recognizing the need to self-critique or question what one thinks one knows. The kind of parochial drivel that is lacking in historical awareness and is therefore oblivious to the contribution it makes to perpetuating the many myths that shape what we think we know.

In his recent book *Subverting Global Myths*, the Sri Lankan nuclear scientist, scholar, and theologian Vinoth Ramachandra exposed the many myths that shape and condition Western thought in the 21st century. Myths like the naive belief that governments never engage in acts of terrorism when in fact they actually do and such acts are hundred times more deadly for innocent civilians than any attacks by so-called terrorists have ever done; myths that make terrorist acts a

novel phenomenon associated with Arab Muslims when in fact terrorism was alive and thriving in European cities since the French revolution and long before 9/11.

Myths that pretend the U.S. has not been the biggest haven in the world for terrorists and corrupt ex-dictators of repressive regimes when in fact it has. Myths that downplay Africa's contribution through slavery and colonization to the industrialization of Europe and the U.S., and its continuing economic exploitation at the hands of Western governments and corporations! Myths perpetuating the notion that Europeans were the architects of Western civilization all on their own, when in fact the West owes a great debt to Arab, Indian, Chinese, and African civilizations in science, technology, art, literature and economics over the course of the last 1,000 years. The list of such myths is endless.

Ramachandra suggests that historical attentiveness and awareness is a means by which we can temper our ignorance and be better equipped to subvert the political tendency to manipulate language so that lies sound truthful and human atrocities sound respectable. He suggests that it is this historical amnesia that needs to be addressed today in the U.S. and Western Europe in order to counter the kind of parochial perspectives pervasive in our otherwise well-oiled media machinery, in our political circles, in our economic forums, yes, even in the academy, not to mention our theological institutions.

Why is this important for us as the body of Christ?

Because as instruments for making real God's intercultural vision, it is not enough that we know the Hebrew Bible, it is not enough that we are conversant in the New Testament, it is not enough that we are good and faithful Christian folks, it is not enough that we are great theologians! It is almost comical if not more sad to read that the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann after 9/11 wrote an essay calling suicide bombers "a new type of demonic and apocalyptic terrorism" in the same tone President Bush spoke of a "new kind of evil,"⁵ both obviously operating under the kind of myths highlighted above. We must know our human history and development. We must know the context under which our human sacred texts were written; and how our world religions and civilizations were formed.

We must be more aware of the consequences of our actions, for ourselves, for our fellow human beings, and God's creation in the long term, if for example, using a very real situation here in Canada, the proposal to dam portions of the northern rivers to produce hydroelectric power for the American market goes ahead. We must know that whatever we buy in our supermarket shelves in Winnipeg, and the transactions taking place in Wall Street, New York, impact the lives of millions of unseen faces miles away. We must know that all too often the consequences of what we do and what maintains our lifestyle in the West in fact deprive those many unseen faces further of even the most basic of needs—needs that most of us here today take for granted. And we must know that such consequences do lead to discontent which come back to haunt us one way or another.

We owe it to ourselves, to each other, and to our future generations to be well informed. This is important because, lest we forget, the tree of life is also a symbol of wisdom (Proverbs 3:18) and to

⁵ Ramachandra p. 50

my mind, wisdom is earned through enquiry, research, seeking, experiencing, and understanding the world in which we live.

In the same way that water can unify and divide, so is human diversity capable of unifying and dividing peoples. If seen as a threat, it is divisive, if seen as enriching and life-giving, it is an incomparable force of unity and mutual interdependency. We deprive ourselves of the latter all too often because our ignorant prejudices stand in the way of seeing God in Christ in the neighbour who is different.

Often those determined to separate peoples from each other and from God succeed by preying on unfounded fears and ignorance. This tactic has worked very successfully in magnifying paranoia over human differences—and we all know that such divisive tactics have been successfully employed in our churches as much as anywhere else. This is a key contributing factor in our church's rather slow response to God's intercultural invitation and purpose for humanity.

A characteristic of an intercultural church is its ability to recognize the uniqueness of each culture and affirm cultural diversity. Like Gonzalez, I cannot imagine appreciating another culture without respecting and valuing my own too. At the same time, it is other cultures that can help us see our own cultures more clearly. Ramachandra writes that he only becomes aware of his own cultural tradition and community by being deeply exposed to another, and that both what is good can be cherished and what is bad can be challenged. A tribal people's contentment and sense of ecological harmony, for example, is valuable because of the challenge it presents to our own cultures.

All this is to say that it is our responsibility, yours and mine, to make real this vision of John's for what our churches in the 21st century should look like. And to do so, we cannot afford to be less than well equipped spiritually, well informed historically, loyal and faithful Christians, passionately committed to living God's intercultural reality, and at the same time trusting completely in the transformative power of Jesus Christ to give us what we need to make the changes necessary.

It is up to us, you and me, to make our United Churches in Winnipeg and indeed in the whole of Manitoba reflect the multicultural nature of Canadian society. How many of our United Churches in Winnipeg regularly use in their worship services any number of the more than a hundred languages currently spoken in the wider Winnipeg community? How many of our United Church ministers speak more than the culturally dominant languages in Canada of English and French? How many speak any of the Aboriginal languages? Are we equipping our minority ethnic ministers in the church to ably minister to the intercultural church so that United Church ministers of Korean origins are fluent in both their own tongue and English; and United Church ministers of Filipino background are fluent in both English and Tagalog.... Are we ready in the United Church to go further and ensure our ministers are fluent in at least a third language so that a Tagalog native speaker is fluent in Cree, and a Korean native speaker is fluent in Spanish, and an English native speaker is fluent in Chinese....

I am continually frustrated by the response from some in the church that the answer to our language problems is to just wait for the first generation migrants/immigrants to go because the second generation all speak English. Many of us have no choice but to be articulate and have the ability to

communicate in the dominant English language. But being an intercultural church is also about the ability to be multilingual as a key characteristic of a healthy intercultural church. Our second generations need their cultural heritage and roots as well. My Tongan language and culture are equally important for my 14-year-old daughter as her European English heritage. I see too many of our younger generations lost and alienated because their parents were stupid enough to believe that becoming more *palangi* (Western; European) is better than maintaining their Samoan or Fijian cultural identity in Australia, or someone had convinced them that turning their backs on their own cultures is the only way to succeed in a Western context! I know from my own experience that I could not have negotiated my way in the West—from Auckland, to Sydney, to LA, to London, to Toronto—without being firmly rooted in my own Tongan cultural mores and identity and fluent in both my mother tongue and in English. And don't worry—I am deciding what third language I must become fluent in as I consider and reflect on a call to ordained ministry.

I am also alarmed that some in the church seem to think that being intercultural means dumbing down! This perception is damaging especially in the area of theological education. This is almost a by-product of multiculturalism, but still another misconception that must be corrected. It does no good for our minority ethnic diasporic communities to have those of us in church leadership training and development assessed and evaluated in less academically rigorous terms because of cultural difference. It is precisely because of cultural difference that we must be held to the same standards as our cohorts from the dominant culture. This is the best way to equip minority ethnic ministers with appropriate tools for leadership in dominant cultural contexts, as well as for offering quality and adequate leadership for their own diasporic communities that are in dire needs. Besides, non-European cultural ways of knowing and forms of knowledge production are different, but no less demanding in their requirement for rigorous intellectual assessment and practical application.

It has to be said that Canada's successful adoption of multiculturalism, as the world's only constitutionally multicultural country, has a lot to teach other multicultural societies in the west. I was delighted to learn that unlike many Western countries, Canada sees itself as an immigrant nation, in need of immigrants. Canada has always possessed a healthy respect for difference, as seen in its British North America Act of 1867 where specific rights for its Aboriginal peoples were codified, as well as for its English-speaking British Protestants and French-Speaking Catholics—these rights were recognized on the basis of race, religion, and language. This commitment to multiculturalism is seen in the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. Here there is no separation between church and state, and though Canada has not been free of controversy over multiculturalism, it has managed to negotiate what “reasonable accommodation” between the majority and minorities mean.⁶

I learned that in Canada, respect for difference goes only as far as the law of the land allows. That means that the power to define citizen conduct rests only with the people's parliaments—federal, provincial, and municipal. A case in point was a recent debate in Quebec over “reasonable accommodation” where a municipal council decided to pass a code of conduct for immigrants. This led to a commission headed by two of Canada's eminent academics, Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, the latter being an architect of Canada's multicultural policy. The commission's report

⁶ Haroon Siddiqui, *No Room for Bigots*, *The New Internationalist*, May 2009, p10-12.

made clear that there was no problem other than “trivial incidents” being blown out of all proportions by the sensationalist media. Some of the key points of the report made clear the society’s collective responsibility for an immigrant’s integration process; supported the right of citizens to freedom of religion and to religious display in public spaces; exposed the often irrational nature of opposition to religious practices and clothes (e.g., hijab), and outlined the criteria that limit the duty of accommodation, defined in terms of “undue hardship” to others in terms of costs, security, public order and so on.

The point was made that a liberal society must confront bigots, not cower to them!⁷ This is a lesson that many other Western liberal and multicultural democracies like Australia need to learn from Canada.

The question for us: how much of this successful multiculturalism in the Canadian society translates into the life and witness of United Church congregations throughout the land? If this commitment to multiculturalism is not reflected in the life of our faith communities here, then a great deal of work is still ahead of us—you and me who are called to make God’s intercultural vision a reality! Can we do it? Can we be radical and start living as if the new heaven and the new earth is already here! Can we be visionaries who live the new heaven and new earth as realities and not just possibilities and aspirations? Can we be like the many who seek to create a new world as healing leaves that transform lives? Can we be the healing leaves that address the root cause of injustices in society and build harmonious intercultural communities that can foreshadow what the reign of God looks like?

Here in Winnipeg we shall break bread together, and as we eat and drink from the life giving water and bread of life, we are reminded of who we are: the Body of Christ! We are reminded that we have been made holy by Jesus Christ and that we are the consecrated leaves of the tree of life that is Christ, for the healing of the nations!

Here together we will seek to be filled with the water of the river of life coursing through each of us, flowing through our communities, our churches, and through the whole United Church, as we aspire to live into God’s originating vision of a truly intercultural church!

And we need to believe it, yes, we need to know that there is a river of life flowing out from each of us, making us into healing leaves that restore sight to the blind and enable the lame to walk, that open prison doors and set free those who are captive to wealth, idols, selfishness! Yes, indeed, there is a river of life flowing out from you and me. I am reminded of a song I learned as a child which goes like this:

Sing: “There’s a river of life flowing out from me...”

Yes, remember that you and I are the baptized peoples of Christ. You comprise the body of Christ for the Canada of the 21st century. Take heart! The strength to be healing leaves comes directly from the life source of the tree of life that is Christ Jesus. You are nourished by the water of life

⁷ Ibid p.12

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that comes directly from God. Remember your baptism and know that you are connected to something far greater than your current reality. You are to go from here and build the intercultural body of Christ where you are! Let us pray:

*God our mother, living water, river of mercy, source of life
In whom we live and move and have our being
Who refreshes our weariness, quenches our thirst,
Bathes and washes and cleanses our wounds
Be for us always a fountain of life
And for all the world a river of hope
Springing up amid the deserts of despair
Honour and blessing, glory and praise to you forever. Amen!*

Symbolic action:

A branch of healing leaves is submerged in a bowl of living water then used to sprinkle the gathered people with the water of life, accompanied by the words:

“Always remember that you are baptized and be thankful!”

Amen!