

Edited version of Bishop Zac Niringiye's address, launch of the Uganda Faiths Network, October 30, 2013

Bishop Zac began his keynote address by outlining some of the environmental challenges facing Uganda.

Uganda is a 'well watered country'. Yet in 2009 the Uganda Red Cross said two million people in Uganda were at risk of starvation due to the combination of prolonged drought, out of season planting, the ripple effect of the 2008 floods, climate change. Distortions in climate patterns are the result of human activities, of abuse of nature and the environment.

The status of Lake Victoria has not been published for some time. The amount of refuse poured into the lake every day is a tale the National Environment Authority has no courage to tell us. But if they did, we would all stop eating fish.

Have you noticed how, when you approach Kampala, there is a haze above? Every time I come into Kampala, I start coughing. Those who care for our environment are afraid to publish the air quality figures for Kampala.

Seventy-five percent of Kampala water has faecal matter in it. Most Kampalans don't have access to piped water, they use spring water and all of the spring water has faecal matter in it. Cholera cases rise every time it rains because people are drinking water with faeces in it.

The challenge before us is not just about care of the environment, it is about the sustainability of life in Uganda. As we engage in this subject, it is to do with life and death. It is to do with the quality of life for all of us. I hope we take it seriously.

I want to talk about four things:

1. God is concerned about humankind.
2. God is concerned about His Creation. Why? Because God has absolute rights over the Earth.
3. A degraded environment is neither God's idea nor is it pleasing in his eyes.
4. God's agency for transformation is humankind.

God is concerned about humankind

All our faiths are grounded in the idea that God is concerned about

humankind. That is why each faith has the idea of salvation. I want to tell you, firstly, that when children die the way they do in this country because of diarrhoea, because of dysentery, because of cholera, because of malaria, because of environmentally related diseases that are preventable, God is not happy. That when trees are cut, consequently floods rage and then the waters overtake human beings and they die, God is not happy.

God is concerned about humankind but, secondly, God is concerned about His Creation. God is concerned about his Creation, why? Because God has absolute rights over the Earth.

This is for believers

I heard from my colleague sister Susie [Weldon] explaining that theirs [ARC] is a secular organisation. I hope by that you do not mean that you do not have a faith in God. I hope by that you don't mean that you think the world is here simply accidentally.

Let me tell you there are many in our world whose idea, whose perception, of religion is instrumentalist, it is utilitarian. It is 'here is a large number of human beings, they happen to believe in God. Let's not discuss whether they are right or wrong but since there are so many, let us use them to change the world'. I will be very clear because I have engaged with groups like the World Bank, USAID. When it comes to talking about God, they say, 'uh-uh, don't talk about God in our meetings because for us we don't believe', so, okay, okay.

So let me be very clear. This is for believers. This is for believers! This world belongs to God by right. This world did not just happen. Let's be very clear that here we will talk about God. Here we will talk about God.

And in talking about God, we don't talk about God in triumphalist ways. We don't claim we know more of Him than anybody else. I hope we speak about God in a sense of seekers that creates space for any and everybody to talk about God. Friends, let's not claim that we have monopoly over the understanding about God.

God is concerned about Creation

So let's try, let's talk about God together. I think we can agree that God is concerned about Creation because it is His. 'The Earth is the Lord's' – the Hebrew scriptures, the Bible – 'the Earth is the Lord's and everything in the world and all who live in it for God founded it upon the seas and

established it upon the waters’.

This Earth is God’s property, God has absolute rights over it. We read it in the scriptures, ‘In the beginning God’, so you see the beginning of all is God Himself. God is not only in the beginning, God is the beginning itself. He is both the origin and the originator of all. This truth is a marker. This truth is the basis, is the ground, on which we stand. It is the very ground of faith, it’s the ground on which we can stand and engage with courage and boldness about matters of the environment. It is big, it is crucial, it is important.

Sadly, the people of faith, we have shown the world we don’t believe in God. Why? We say we believe in God but do not care about His Creation. We say we believe in God and participate in destroying what God has made. We say we believe in God and when it comes to speaking about nature, environment, Creation care, hills and valleys, let me tell you we are complicit, sadly, in the process of destroying the beauty that God has made.

It is not beauty, it is destruction

In the Hebrew scriptures again, in the Psalms, the Psalmist writes, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands.’ I read this and I think of the grounds, the Earth, the little space called Uganda, our hills and our land, yes, there is beauty. But there is another story that we see. It is not beauty, it is destruction.

I see my dear brother Bishop Nathan from Hoima. Have you taken this route towards the East? Have you noticed the things that they sell most on that road. There was a time when you could find tomatoes on the road. You could find, what else?, mangoes on the road. What else? Oranges. What else? Jackfruit. What else?

Today the most enduring feature on either Hoima road or the road going towards the North East is charcoal. Charcoal. I was talking to people from that region and they told me that now they have started cutting mango trees for charcoal. They cut all the trees. Any place you find charcoal as the biggest business, cry. Cry. Why? Because, have you noticed, charcoal dealers never cut trees that they have planted? Now, we all use charcoal, don’t we? Ninety-two percent use charcoal or biomass in their homes.

Now, what happened to us? You go to our worship centres, to the schools that we own. It is amazing, schools have no trees in them. We don’t have trees in our schools, they are bare, very bare. Is there something about

holiness and bare grounds? You find a huge mosque and there are no trees. You find a huge church, I see cathedrals, there are no trees and we, the bishops, the clergy, we love charcoal. We use charcoal, we use firewood. There is something that I think has happened to us. Have we forgotten God or we don't make a connection between God and charcoal? You understand our problem – we don't make a connection between God and charcoal.

The point I'm really making is God owns Creation. For us to pander to destroy it, to work it in a way that is not sustainable, is not pleasing to God, is not holy, is not actions of faith. You see, God is not pleased. I am suggesting that God is not pleased with us because what He sees is destruction rather than conservation, sustainable use of the environment, as the scriptures teach.

The third thing I wanted to say is that the degradation of the environment is not God's idea nor God's ideal. The scriptures are very clear that when God finished the Creation in Genesis's account, God saw it and it was very good. But what we see today is not very good, what we see is destruction right, left and centre.

Humankind, instead of being God's agency for sustainable use of the environment, human agency is now destructive instead of being stewards of Creation. In the Genesis account, the command that God gives to humankind is to till the land, to work it – in other words exploit it, let it work for you, this whole idea of development – but there is the second: take care of it. If you can't plant, don't cut, that's it. If you can't plant, don't cut. The Holy One does not allow you to slaughter, if you can't multiply. The responsibility that God has given to humanity is to plant and cut only after you plant. It's about working it and taking care of it – you understand this dual responsibility. That, I hope, becomes then the way we look at the future.

A vision for the restoration of the environment

We, therefore, can grow a vision for the restoration of the environment. We, therefore, of all people should be able to say we are committed to ensure Creation care, environment conservation. Why? Because we have a mandate, it behoves us from our faith in God so if we do not, we are disobedient.

And those of you, those of us, who talk about the fires of hell, we should even say if you cut and you're not planting, hell is waiting. I'm serious. Let's talk about those who are murdering our environment. Let's be very bold as we speak about them.

That is why I am gratified to be associated with this important event. When we launch, when we speak together, how we as people of faith must be able to work it and take care of it, the environment.

I've already highlighted the nature of our challenges, the grounds of our action, let me now propose moving forward, what we ought to consider.

I was asked to look back and suggest my response. I am afraid there is not 'my response' to look back to, I am really afraid. If we are to look back, friends, let us be honest, we have been participants in destruction. Let's be honest. When we look back, I don't think we have anything to say to ourselves and, for that matter, to God – 'see what we have done as a result of our faith and our joint action'.

That is why this is a milestone event, that together from our different faith traditions we can say 'we disagree on many things but we can agree on this. That this Creation, somebody owns it and it's not us'. And you know He owns it for us, for posterity, for those who have gone before us. We can say that.

Actions going forward

So what actions going forward? Because this is nascent, because this is fresh, I want to suggest three things that should preoccupy us.

1. In the initial stage, let's not be in a hurry. I suggest that the first action must involve mapping the impact of environmental degradation and abuse. You know, we need to really get to understand how our actions as Ugandans, as human beings, politicians, religious leaders, farmers, all of us, the impact they have both on Creation, nature, as well as the quality of human life. We must map it.

2. Let us assess, on the basis of that mapping, critical entry points. Imagine if all the entire religious faith fraternity agreed 'we are going to fight to preserve Lake Victoria'. Don't pick too many fronts, select a few in order for us to focus our energies, our laser, for impact. If we focus on Lake Victoria, all those people who are creating industries, they will come to us and say 'please what shall we do?'

Let's focus on planting trees, everywhere. Let's not do everything, please. Let this network not try to do everything. Focus. Because the problem with religious organisations, we are everywhere and nowhere. Lake Victoria is disappearing, forests are disappearing and then we say we are everywhere. If we are – doing what?

3. The third – action. Action. Secretary General Joshua [Kitakule of the Inter-religious Council of Uganda) knows that I am really tired of conferences and seminars. Let's not come here except if we are reporting. Please don't put money into another meeting. Some of us are tired of meetings. Let's talk about action and nobody should come to a meeting unless they have a report. So we say to the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, if you do not have a programme for planting trees in every mosque area, you are not going to be invited to the conference. And to the Church of Uganda, if you don't have a strategy, and to the Catholic church... Let's talk about action.

And when we are all going to stand to protect Lake Victoria, irrespective of who wants it destroyed, we stand together, and if you are not going to be with us, please stay there, just stay, don't trouble us. For us we are very clear – why? because we believe in God.

Boldness and courage

In order for this to happen, I want to suggest three things you must be aware of. This mission is not for the fearful. This mission requires boldness and courage, boldness and courage. That's number one.

You know I have very difficult moments. There is a swamp below where I live. You know these very rich people, what they do. They carry soil from wherever, they fill swamps. It is serious – fill swamps – and they build there. But you know you don't joke with nature. So sometimes it rains heavily. Let me tell you sometimes what I pray – this is not good, please forgive me, Father, forgive me – sometimes I pray that it rains so heavily that these people's houses are flooded, then maybe they will learn. Excuse me. These people have so much money, they can buy plots where there is space.

Conviction and candour

The second thing that will give you courage and boldness is conviction and candour.

Conviction – if you have no convictions about this, don't try. If you are not willing to be honest, don't try. Because some of the people who abuse the environment are members of your church. So you will stand there in church and talk about abuse of the swamp, and the man who puts the most money in the bag is the one sitting at the front. After church he will say, 'But bishop, how can you talk about the swamp where my house is? In

fact it is because of that business that I am bringing in money.’ Now you must walk up to the pulpit and say uh-uh, in spite of whoever.

You must be honest. Whether it is the Bishop you will tell him. If it is the Sheikh, you will tell him. If it is the member of parliament, you will tell them. If it is Bishop Zac you will tell him. Why? Because Bishop Zac is only Zac, he is not God, alleluia! Candour is to do with honesty – what you see is what there is.

Commitment and consistency

The third thing – commitment and consistency. Commitment and consistency. You can’t say that it’s okay for Bishop Nathan to build in the swamp and then come back and say he can’t build in the swamp. The same language you use for Bishop Nathan must be the language you use for [everyone]. The point I am making is this, we must be consistent but we must also have commitment.

We must commit ourselves to specific action. And when we say we are all going to do tree planting, we could declare a year for tree planting. Then our bosses, the secretariats, will get reports saying this organisation planted a million trees. Give us targets and then create targets for monitoring. Because there are people who plant trees in briefcases. I think we need to be very clear but we need to see commitment. Let me be very clear. We can, we can.

I just returned from Switzerland. Let me tell you in that country, you can drink water anywhere. You can drink it from the rivers, there are taps just everywhere. You can drink water and it is safe. It wasn’t always safe. They made a commitment. Let me tell you, I have been to Los Angeles, there was a time when you went to Los Angeles, California, and there was a huge smoke. You couldn’t see beyond. Have you noticed when you come to Kampala from Entebbe, there is a smoke. Have you seen? You think that is smoke. No! It is the abuse of our air.

It is possible to clean our air, it is possible. It is possible to clean Lake Victoria, it is possible to plant trees, it is possible, we can. In fact, not only is that true, we must, we must. We have no choice. As people of faith, we have no choice. We must.

Delivered to the launch event for the Uganda Faiths Network on Environment Action (UFNEA) in Kampala, Uganda on October 30, 2013