

Niwano Peace Foundation

32nd Niwano Peace Prize

Tokyo, May 14th, 2015

Commemorative Address

BRINGING DOWN THE WALLS

Pst. Mrs. Esther Ibanga, President and Founder, Women Without Walls Initiative

Inasan ni go aisatsu [Greetings to you all]

I greet you all in the Precious Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I remember the day I got an email from Niwano Peace Foundation nominating me for the 32nd Niwano Peace Price Award; I thought it was a Scam. I wondered why an organization founded by a Buddhist would want to recognize an African Christian woman, a pastor for that matter. I have never been to Japan, I had no affiliations with Tokyo, and there was no relationship whatsoever. But as time went on, it became clear that it wasn't a fraud. Here I am standing before you today, living that truth that first came as a mail.

This whole experience taught me to know that there are still people that have chosen to denature the self within them, extinguish the seed of segregation and alienate the mental limitations brought about by religious diversities. These unusual people have chosen to step out of the ordinary and walk the superhuman path to ensure peace reigns on the earth. These people have established a movement with a philosophy that says humanity is an equal and one family irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity or nation.

They have shown the world how to have high value for human life. They have demonstrated an unrelenting commitment to serve humanity and make it better. They have over the years inspired the cooperation of world changers to work together in making better the world we are living in. They have brought down the walls of inter-religious differences and have focused the energies of the many world religions to foster peace. These people express divinity; for God so loved the world that He sent His only beloved Son to die for the sins of all; whether or not we accept Him.

The founder of this unusual foundation, Nikkyo Niwano and the generations after him who believed his values and are living it today have challenged us all. Nikkyo Niwano saw walls that had the capacity to hinder world peace and he sought to bring them down. Today, the same vision committed to faithful men and women is still being lived. Nikkyo Niwano's vision to recognize, encourage and amplify the efforts of people who have dedicated their lives to bring down the walls of inter-religious disunity and foster cooperation among these different religions in order to produce a breeding ground for world peace is something only a visionary man can do. He has made it possible for me to stand here before you today. This has a lot to say that vision has no limitations. It has the capacity to do anything, attract anyone from anywhere in the world in order to realize its purpose.

Therefore on this note, I find it both a privilege and an honour to be the recipient of the 32nd Niwano Peace Prize presented to me by the Niwano Peace Foundation. I cannot but say thank you to everyone that found my effort in peace building and conflict resolution worth recognizing. You made this possible by nominating and choosing me as the 32nd recipient for this year's award. To me this is a huge encouragement. It is a confirmation of my mantra, which says that nothing invested in the lives of people is ever lost. It always comes back to you because God is not unrighteous to forget any labor of love. My fellow soldiers in the fight for world peace, I want to let you know that no matter the challenges you face,

no matter the oppositions and frustrations, even though no one claps for you, keep doing what you believe. In the fullness of time; the voice of your deeds will be heard.

Africa and in particular Nigeria is a country that has been plagued with numerous wars, crises, killings, fighting, kidnappings, and violence, most of which have been caused by ethno-religious differences. The results of these have caused so much pain, hurts, and sorrows. Hearts have been broken, homes destroyed, families displaced, lives shattered. Unfortunately women and children have been the major victims of these predicaments. All of these have bred hatred, segregation and disunity among people. These have stifled the development of my dear country and continent. Yet there are few of us that have made up our minds to bring healing and hope to the Nigerian woman and her child. Our desire is to bring down the walls set up by Politics using ethnicity and religion.

Women Without Walls Initiative was formed as a result of the numerous ethno-religious crises that ravaged the state where I live in Plateau State; Nigeria. The killings, kidnappings and massacres were just too much. The indigenes of Plateau State (majorly Christians) were in a war with migrants (Hausa Moslems) that have lived in the state for a long time. Serial attacks were carried out back and forth as both communities suffered huge losses of lives and properties. Mass burials were the order of the day, many people lost their lives. As always, women and children were the most battered. Many of them lost both their husbands and children. However in the case of Dogon NaHawa; they were victims themselves as 530 Christian women and children were killed by Islamic fundamentalists. I saw the need for these killings to stop and a strong desire to put a stop to this evil.

This led me; along with some Christian Women to lead a peaceful protest march in March 2010. About 100,000 Christian women within the state came out to lend their voices to put a stop to the killings. We marched the streets of Jos to the State House of Assembly and Government house dressed in black, expressing our grief over the wanton loss of human lives

especially that of women and children and demanding that the Government fishes out the perpetrators of this evil and bring them to justice. The protest brought women to the forefront of the call for peace and to put an end to violence in Plateau State. In response to the protest march done by the Christian women; the Muslim women held their own peaceful protest demanding that the killings of Muslims in Jos be stopped also; as they too had lost loved ones to the violent killings. In spite of the two protest marches; the killings continued. It was on this premise that I decided to reach out to the Muslim women enjoining everyone irrespective of religion and tribe to come together as one body in the fight against ethno-religious violence. For the sake of peace it was important to build a community of women with one purpose, which is to advocate for and influence the peaceful co-existence of people among the Christian and Moslem communities. We refused to be involved in the Politics and would rather be solution minded.

We found out that the root of these walls existed in the minds of people. It was a mindset. People have come to believe so many wrong things. They have believed that as long as you are not from the same tribe or religion with someone else, you are not their brother or sister and should not be trusted; but be regarded as an enemy. Some had built hatred and resentment in their hearts as a result of losses they suffered during war and were waiting for an opportunity to revenge. They had shifted blames on to the other community, blaming them for such losses. It was clear that the Christian and Muslim communities would never live together if something was not done. So we undertook strong advocacies to religious and tribal leaders from both divides, security agencies, women leaders and youths themselves undertook press conferences together with each tribal and religious women leaders speaking the same thing in different languages to the populace; all advocating peace. Peace rallies; story telling in schools were some of the activities we undertook as women without walls initiative.

The wall of ethnicity and religion was pulled down to a large extent. The hatred, hurt, pain and distrust built by the crises between the Christian and Muslim communities was addressed. Then we started building within us mutual trust, love, care, commitment and developmental projects in volatile communities to address grievances and act as entry points to these communities. These created an atmosphere for peace to be planted and nurtured into what we are experiencing today. We discovered that peace would not exist if these walls were still standing upright. Now together as Christian and Muslim women we led a protest match of "Bring back our girls" campaign. These girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram. We had since then worked tirelessly in four volatile communities of both Christians and Muslims to counter violent extremism and terrorism.

In order to achieve our goals, we developed an organizational focus on seven thematic areas:

1. Advocacy to all stakeholders
2. Provision of relief to internally displaced persons and the needy.
3. Training of women in peace building initiatives/activities
4. Developmental projects in under-privileged communities with grievances.
5. Trauma healing and reconciliation for teenage war victims
6. Police Community Dialogues.
7. Mother's School as well as other collaborative efforts with sister organizations both locally and internationally. Through these means, we have made tremendous progress in restoring peace between the Christian and Moslem communities within Plateau State, Nigeria.

We have crossed the barrier of segregation and have made WOWWI a community of women who think that peace is possible and that it starts from them. They now know that they have the power to influence the decisions of their children and husbands. Men and youths are no longer

carrying machetes and guns to fight and kill their fellow man at every slight provocation. They have come to know that there are better ways of resolving conflicts. And it is not by killing someone else. Peace has become the priority.

Although we have made great progress, there are still many grounds to be covered. We are yet to reach the Fulani herdsmen and the communities they have problems with. This is a national issue in my country as it is not only Plateau State that experiences it. I must thank Non-Governmental Organizations and state governments of these affected states that have taken it upon themselves to restore peace between these fighting communities. This is therefore a call to all stakeholders concerned, both in Nigeria and around the world to join hands so that together we can design an all-inclusive approach to bring down these walls that religion and ethnicity have built in the psyche of the some people in the Nigerian populace. These walls are not physical. They are in our minds. We have to uproot them and set up new ways of thinking that encourages peace and the protection of lives around us. I am committed to this course and I believe I'm also speaking the mind of everyone who is working hard in this line as well.

This award wouldn't have been possible without my fellow laborers and beloved sisters in Women Without Walls Initiative. Their dedication, commitment and die-hard attitude towards achieving our vision, which is to ***“develop a non-violent and all inclusive approach to conflict resolution and peace building in Nigeria, through women who are natural agents of change”***, has been amazing. They have fought hard with me, entered the most dangerous and volatile communities to make sure that we reach women and youths from different tribes and religions. I celebrate every one of you. This award is an encouragement to say that your dedicated service is not in vain.

I would not fail to talk about the insurgency that has plagued Nigeria for a while now. You all know that as soon as the name Nigeria is mentioned

internationally, the next word that comes is Boko Haram. It is clear that Boko Haram does not practice a religion that believes in the same thing we all sitting here believe. And it is a fact that human life is sacred and no one has the right to take the life of another no matter what. The bombings, killings, massacres and kidnappings perpetrated by Boko Haram have become the major headlines on CNN, BBC, Aljazeera, NHK word (English)TV, Asahi-ANN Tokyo and other media tabloids when Nigeria is talked about. It is clear that the fight for peace is a journey that we all must keep walking. When it will be fully achieved, that I don't know. But one thing is certain peace will always win over violence.

The kidnap of 276 Chibok girls made major headlines last year. The Boko Haram sect in Borno State kidnapped schoolgirls and took them to a place we know nothing of. As the leader of the group threatened, that he would sell them as slaves to other countries, I kept wondering what trauma these girls would be going through. They no longer experience the love, protection and comforting arms of their parents, but are now living with a national and horrific terror. How traumatic and heart wrenching can that be, both for the girls and their parents.

Lending our voice to the voices of many others worldwide, in 2014, WOWWI mobilized women and a protest rally was held, calling on the Nigerian government to expedite the search and secure the release of the abducted Chibok girls. I have not stopped campaigning for the release of the Chibok girls as I use every platform; both locally and internationally including the UN to advocate for the release of these girls and we will not give up hope that one day they will be released, healed and restored for with God nothing is impossible.

For every hero we have lost as a result of this battle for peace, I want to say that you will never be forgotten. We will tell our children about how you fought gallantly for Nigeria. Laying down your lives for a worthy cause

has left a legacy that we will never forget. Your immortality in the history books of Nigeria will never be erased. And like the Nigerian National Anthem would say, "The labor of our heroes past shall never be in vain." This is to say that we who are alive will keep fighting for peace and continue the legacy that you have left for us. Our children and children's children will also live on this legacy. Time is too weak to erase you from our memories and uproot you from our hearts. You will never be forgotten because people who follow the path of peace live for forever. You all live on.

To every family that had lost their son, daughter, brother, sister, father, mother or relative as a result of this insurgency, I want to let you know that this battle will definitely be won in the end. Peace will always win. For the people presently in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps all around Nigeria, I want to let you know that your stay in those camps is temporal. The battle will soon be over, and then you will now go back to your homes. I know that there is no place like home. It is our earnest prayer that you will get back to your homes. Never be discouraged; do not allow the seed of resentment, hatred, anger or revenge grow in your hearts. It is okay to feel angry and vengeful, but let it out. Do not allow that seed live in you. Let the peace of God that transcends all understanding guard your hearts and minds. For by forgiveness we set ourselves and others free. And by love we express divinity and live like gods on the earth. Stay strong my brothers and sisters.

Eradicating Boko Haram is one thing, but then much more work needs to be done in the healing process of these victims. WOWWI is committed to that. These Internally Displaced Persons living in camps like refugees in

their own country need to be reabsorbed back into their communities. They need to have their communities given back to them. They need to get their lives back. Young people need to go back to their schools ;women need to go back to their markets places, some need to go back to their churches and mosques, while others need to go back to their places of work and farms. There is need for the development of a proper program to reintegrate these displaced people back to their communities. They need to recover their lives again.

More importantly, many have been traumatized and pained. Many are heart broken. The seeds of revenge, anger and resentment must not be allowed to grow in their hearts. This is because if these victims nurture these seeds, especially the young ones, we might stand a danger of raising another generation of people that will cause greater havoc because they have come to believe that revenge over their loss and the pain they've been through is the only way to feel better. These people need healing. Some of them need to be treated psychologically and spiritually. Their mental health and recovery is very important. We would love to see a nation that is whole again, completely free from the terror and fear of possible attacks and bombings.

This is therefore a call to everyone, organizations, governments and the international communities. I have never seen where darkness overcame light. It won't start in Nigeria. Let us all keep praying for my country and continue to lend helping hands to put a stop to this calamity. International collaborations will go a long way in restoring peace to my dear country. As you can see, the need to make happen world peace are enormous.

WOWWI is willing to partner with anyone, organizations or governments to ensure that peace is completely restored to the affected states.

I want to say thank you again for this rare award bestowed on me. This award is dedicated to every woman in Plateau State who saw their husbands and children macheted in cold blood, to those who fought for peace and conflict resolution among the Christian and Muslim communities. This award is to the mothers of the Chibok girls and also to many mothers whose children have been kidnapped by the insurgents. This is to my fellow soldiers clamouring for the rescue of these girls. This award is for the Nigerian woman; the African woman who is in the interior villages of Zambia, Liberia, Sudan, South Africa, Kenya, Algeria, Malawi, and all the different countries in Africa, working tirelessly for the peace of her community, her nation, the African continent and the world. Your efforts in bringing down the walls that would hinder world peace are of inestimable value. You are all my inspiration.

Today is a memorable day for me, not only because I'm a winner of an award, but also because this same day marks exactly 21 years since I walked the aisle with an amazing man Dr. Iko Ibanga, who has taught me that life is all about humanity and service. His support and encouragement to pursue my passion for the peace of my warring community has provided me with an inner strength to forge ahead despite overwhelming challenges. I want to say thank you for being there for me even when the work seem very hard and impossible to achieve.

Thank you to my children; who tolerated mummy's absence from home with great understanding and support. Thank you Anungwu (mother) for teaching me discipline and hard work. Thank you dad; even though gone; your prophecy still rings out! Baban mace!

To my Church; JCMI the remnant Church; mighty warriors In Christ; great overcomers! It`s our season of reward!

My family; siblings and friends for your spiritual support and faith in me thank you!

To my pastor and mentor Pastor Tunde Bakare who saw the walls pushed back, thank you for not letting me quit when the heat was hottest.

Finally to my God and Savior Jesus Christ, the one who called me and ordained me a prophet to the nations, I salute your majesty. For without you I can do nothing. Thank you for your surpassing greatness and Grace that surpasses knowledge. All the Glory belongs to you Lord!

And Heiwa wa anata to issho ni (Peace be with you).

God bless you all! Amen.