

Githinga, Gideon

## The Rev. Dr. Nyambura J. Njoroge : Reflections by a college contemporary

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## **THE REV. DR. NYAMBURA J. NJOROGE: REFLECTIONS BY A COLLEGE CONTEMPORARY**

*Gideon Githinga*

### **Introduction**

This chapter seeks to unveil the genesis of the contributions of the Rev Dr Nyambura J. Njoroge as a leading African woman theologian and a renowned good scholar. Since one's early beginnings shape what they become in future, this chapter reflects on what her contemporaries saw as her dynamics in relation to what she would contribute to church and society.

Nyambura and the author of this chapter entered what was then St Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, as the first-degree scholars on the same day in January 1978. The theological college has since then become St Paul's University. She was single and the author of this chapter was married. As the only Kenyan female student in the college, she was accommodated at the married students' quarters. Her apartment, which she was to share with the only other female student, a Ugandan refugee, was adjacent to ours. My wife and I were then her next-door neighbours.

Nyambura was sponsored at St Paul's by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa [PCEA], the Church that nurtured my wife, Mary's, spiritual formation. Mary together with some of her siblings had been baptized by Nyambura's father, the Reverend Daniel Gitogo Githinji. This relationship made Nyambura, and the two of us close friends and when she needed family warmth our door was opened for her. Our relationship in this set-up made me know Nyambura probably better than the majority of our 1978 classmates. I had come to learn that Nyambura was the last born in her family of nine daughters and that she had no brother. Many of our contemporaries who had known the family saw Nyambura as the "son" in the family. This stance was to be portrayed in her class of seventeen students, sixteen males and one female. Like any of her contemporaries, she was prepared to overcome a number of hurdles, the first one being in the pioneer degree class.

## Enrolling as the First-Degree Class

St Paul's United Theological College had been planning to start a degree class for quite some time. This had been tried nine years earlier in 1969 with five students, but the class was discontinued presumably for lack of competent lecturers and qualified students at the time. The highest qualification that the College had been offering was the Makerere Diploma in Theology sponsored by Makerere University in Uganda. After this there had been the assumption amongst the students that a degree program would be unmanageable. The class was to be determined to ignore the perception that the degree programme was too difficult to be undertaken. But in 1977 under the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa [ATIEA], St Paul's in Kenya and Makane Yesu Theological Seminary in Ethiopia started planning to start their first class of Bachelor of Divinity degree. Makane Yesu opened their doors in September 1977 and St Paul's in January 1978. For us to do same examination, St Paul's had to adjust its academic calendar to start their academic year in September of 1978. We, therefore, had to forego our holidays in our first year to catch up with Makane Yesu. The requirement to enter into this new programme was either two 'A' level passes, or a diploma in theology, or had passed a degree entrance examination or had a first degree in another discipline. The class was, therefore, quite a mixture. Nyambura had been a secondary school teacher and a graduate of Kenya Science Teachers' College.

Everybody engaged in the programme was anxious of what would be the final outcome. This was the time that the country had very few institutions of higher learning. There were therefore only few graduates in Kenya then, many having attained their degrees overseas. There were no local theological institutions offering degrees and anyone seeking this level of education was to seek admission either in the American or European universities and seminaries.

The 1969 failure of St Paul's to continue with the degree class in its first attempt created psychological fear amongst the diploma and certificate students. The students in Nyambura's class started getting discouraging messages from the rest of the student fraternity. Due to the discouragement they got from the rest of the students, this class was determined to work very hard. There was no time for leisure. We had to sacrifice the college *Kamukunji*, a platform where students used to meet between the library and the students' halls of residence to release their tension, by discussing their lecturers and even their church leaders. They also spent

much time discussing the new programme which majority of the regular students maintained that it would never succeed. These discouraging talks isolated the class from their counterparts and could only find its solace in the library. The members made sure they all completed their assignments in time and did thorough study.

On their part, the lecturers worked very hard to ensure that their first-degree class succeeded. They did not want to give failure a chance as had happened nine years before. They gave a lot of assignments and made sure that their examinations were tougher than they previously gave to regular certificate and diploma students they had been used to examine. They maintained that they did not want to create high hopes by giving generous grades. They maintained that what mattered most was the final grade which would be given by external examiners. Apart from the expatriate lecturers, many whose background we did not know, the rest had not taught undergraduate students. Some were even first-degree holders and by university standard were not qualified to teach undergraduates. It was thus serious work for both students and staff.

Nyambura and the rest in her class were to fight the myth that others started the programme and failed to succeed. There had been a *Kamukunji* saying that, even if one worked very hard, they could never get anything above 40% in any given examination. The first Church History paper proved those who discouraged others wrong. There were 50s and 60s in the paper and this fallacy was overcome. The members of the class proved that low grades were mainly as a result of failure of the students in the regular classes to work hard.

But this was not so with Introduction to Biblical Hebrew. Everybody in the class failed our first attempt. We were left wondering whether it was the failure of our lecturer or that the examination was very hard or the paper was wrongly set. In our second attempt every student doing the paper passed. The members of the class fought together to the extent of testing each other before the real examination came. They worked in great collegiality. Every hurdle that was overcome became an encouragement of what lay ahead. There was no room for Nyambura to distance her male counterpart in all the academic struggles.

This was the educational wilderness that Nyambura found herself in; the only female student competing with sixteen men. This must have been a culture shock for her. For her to overcome the hurdles both in and outside

her class, she was to wear a brave face and be like any other male counterpart in her class. Nyambura's boldness was to lead her beyond her class and even St Paul's.

## All Eyes Focused on Nyambura

There were areas that Nyambura was to go alone. She was the pioneer PCEA woman to undertake theological studies. She was to become the first woman minister in this second largest non-Roman Catholic Church denomination in Kenya. The debate of ordination of women was at its highest in the 1970s and 1980s. In the United States of America, especially in the Episcopal Church, the debate went hand in hand with women liberation's and women's rights. Feminist theology was taking centre stage. The PCEA had taken a brave move to admit women to the holy orders, even before its Anglican counterpart. Nyambura was aware of all this. The move was through the approval by the PCEA General Assembly in 1976 after a long debate. The promoter of the debate and the debate itself has been well documented by the late Very Rev John Gatu, the first African General Secretary of the PCEA. During the endless debate on whether the Church should pioneer all other denominations in Kenya, both Catholic and non-Catholic, he recommended to the Moderator and the Senior Clerk of the General Assembly to open the general debate to all the non-commissioners [or invited observers as well]. According to Gatu, one woman stood up to address the Assembly: "Mr. Moderator, it is not our intention to be equal with our male counterparts. There is one thing that a man can never do, but it is the pleasure of women, the joy of suckling a baby. That is our special quality. All we are requesting is for the church to avail us the opportunity to serve the church, sometimes in ways which no man can ever do."<sup>1</sup>

As Nyambura continued with her studies, she was still reflecting on this debate which was no secret to her as her own father was a member of the Assembly. She must have been discerning beyond the rest of us because she was to become the first woman to be ordained by her church and all eyes would be focusing on her. She had been considering how she could serve the church 'sometimes in ways that no man ever do.'

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<sup>1</sup> See John G. Gatu, *Fan into Flame: An Autobiography* [Nairobi, Moran Publishers, 2016], p.150.

Nyambura's father, the Rev Daniel Githinji Gitogo had nine daughters and no son. Nyambura was the ninth daughter and the last born. According to the Kikuyu tradition a man who never got a son in his first marriage was to go for a second wife and try his luck with the second or third wife. And this is one of the causes of polygamy in Africa and among the Muslims. But being what Daniel was, he could not go against his faith and his calling as a committed Christian and as an ordained minister. Therefore, he had given up on the possibility of having someone from his flesh and blood to serve in the priesthood.<sup>2</sup> Daniel must have been among those who said a big 'amen!' when the woman in the general Assembly contended that there is something women could give which men could not.

The desire of her father having someone from amongst his children joining priesthood must have provoked Nyambura to offer herself for the church ministry. She was indirectly giving satisfaction to the father by demonstrating that what a son can do, could also be done by a daughter.

The story that Nyambura has lived confirms that gender is not a limitation when it comes to serving God and humanity. Like what has been said about the seventh son of Jesse, David, God does not look at the age or the appearance of an individual. She was to become a David in Rev Daniel Githinji's family. She was to spearhead women priesthood in the PCEA. Nyambura was therefore swimming against many tides but was determined to succeed.

### **More Strides: Attendance of International Conference, a Wedding and an Examination**

Back to her class at St Paul's and the college fraternity, Nyambura was surrounded by many male students, both married and single. All the single students were mature as traditionally the church may not admit anyone for theological training below the age of twenty-one years. One cannot deny the fact that so many eyes were attracted by the only Kenyan single lady in the college. But thankfully or unfortunately for the prying eyes, Nyambura had already been engaged to Engineer Mbugua Njoroge. The fact that Nyambura had not taken a vow not to marry. The wedding plans could not be deterred by the fact she was joining the holy orders. She

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. John G. Gatu, p.149.

joined the college and went on with her wedding plans as this was not unusual for students joining ministry.

At the same time, being the only PCEA woman undergoing theological training and now a notch higher than the rest, Nyambura was to represent her church at an international women's conference in Europe a few weeks before her first year's examinations. Three key issues were simultaneously happening in Nyambura's life: an international women's conference and probably the first exposure to Europe with all the culture shocks that go with it; a wedding that did not only involve the two individuals but also members of the marriage candidates' families and in extension the church, and of course, the first-degree examination that had been creating much anxiety amongst the candidates due to the pressure already mentioned above.

I am not privy to the discussion in the women's conference, but this was an indication that Nyambura was in future to represent women in the international fora. This was the time that discussions on women liberation were in top gear. African women in particular needed liberation from the men dominated societies. This included polygamy where sometimes the girl child had no freedom to marry the man of her choice and was sometimes forced to become second or third, fourth, or even tenth wife to the one man. This was during the time that some societies denied the girl child right to education for after all she would be married away.

The church too could not escape the blame in relation to women's freedom, including the freedom of joining the ordained ministry. The women had been ignored in church governing organs whilst they comprised over sixty per cent of the church attendance. Many women too had been indoctrinated by Pauline theology that women have no right to stand before men to address them. They had been enslaved by their own beliefs as they are always directed to elect men in church policy making organs. The conference must have addressed how women could free themselves from both cultural and religious beliefs that enslave(d) them. In this conference, Nyambura was an ambassador, not only of the Presbyterian women, but all other African women, both in church and society. It was time to discover what women can give that which men cannot give.

The wedding baggage ordinarily is very engaging in our African context. It is not normally a one-time event. It involves in-depth discussions and negotiations by the members of the two families. In this case the subject

of discussion was Nyambura and Njoroge, her future husband. It was difficult to know where Nyambura got all the time that her presence was required as she never missed classes during this crucial time.

The third hurdle that Nyambura was to overcome during her at St Paul's was the ATIEA examination. This is an examination that came with a lot of anxiety both amongst the students and the lecturers. For the students, the ghosts of the failed class of 1969 were still hovering around. The regular students were still discussing in the *Kamukunji* about the possibility of a massive failure. Furthermore, for the reasons that are discussed above, we entered the programme in January and the year's examinations were coming in July, a record seven months. The class had gone without holidays save a two-week Easter break. But for Nyambura, the two issues discussed above made it more agonizing to her than the rest of the class.

On their part, the lecturers were not ready for failure. I believe this was not the team that saw the whole class drop the programme almost ten years earlier save the late Rev David Philpot, a Church of Scotland missionary who had been there since 1950s. Philpot was the Academic Dean of Studies who had great hope with the new class. The lecturers had given the class lots of assignments and were hopeful that this time round they would succeed. They were, however, careful not to give any students very high grades to avoid students becoming overconfident.

Apart from the Introduction to Biblical Hebrew discussed above, there had not been any other mass failure in a subject. The few who did not pass one or two papers, were able to pass upon their second attempt. The second and the third years' examinations were less challenging. The first year's examinations had already given the class confidence that there was nothing impossible. All the seventeen students were able to graduate with a Bachelor of Divinity degree. That notwithstanding, no student scored a first class or upper second division degree. Fifteen out of seventeen earned a lower second class [between 50% and 59%] and only two got a pass. The first observation here is that the members of this class worked very closely and applying same discipline by not entertaining non-issues to class and removing the myth from the rest of the college fraternity that degree work was so difficult. The second observation was that the lecturers who were now members of the ATIEA did not want to create over confidence amongst the students. In most cases, the external examiners had proved more generous in awarding better grades than St Paul's examiners.



Nyambura still had another hurdle to jump. Their first child, Njoroge, was born a few days before her second year's examination. Thank God that she did not have childbirth complications. She alone knew what she was going through, but it could not have been easy for any mother. Despite all the hurdles that Nyambura went through during her time at St Paul's, she was among the first five best students in her final grade. I believe St Paul's experience is what made Nyambura what she was later to become, namely, a serious scholar and ecumenical leader.

The academic challenges that this pioneering class underwent including the pressure from the rest of the student body really had made the class feel isolated. There was a common notion that even if the class excelled within the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa fraternity, the degree would not be recognized by the Kenyan government. But one Anglican bishop, the late Rt Rev Bishop Sospeter Magua, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Mount Kenya South, the then chairman of the college's Finance Committee, kept on encouraging students from his Diocese that the BD was not a government programme but was intended to enhance theological development in the church. In his diocese he contended that he would pay his graduate clergy the same salary as those graduates working in the government institutions.

Notwithstanding Bishop Magua's encouragement, nearly all the first graduates felt that they would find accreditations by pursuing further theological training in accredited institutions in the West. The church did not find it difficult then to sponsor graduate students as Master's degrees took a shorter period than Bachelor degrees. Furthermore, European and American churches and institutions had generous scholarship grants in the 1970s and 1980s.

After serving our respective churches for between three and five years, one was qualified for a recommendation for further studies. The author of this chapter may not be able to trace where each of his classmate went to study, but at least ten of them attained both Master's and doctoral degrees, five in America and five in Western Europe, giving St Paul's BD its credibility. Nyambura was sponsored by the PCEA to study in the prestigious Princeton University in New Jersey, USA. She eventually did her Masters in Theology and a Doctor of Philosophy [PhD] in the same discipline. I may not be having the statistics, but it is likely that this first class produced the highest percentage of doctoral degrees amongst its members in St Paul's history. The effort toward achieving higher theological

studies can only be attributed to the discouragement that Nyambura and others were confronted with by their colleagues in Certificate and Diploma classes. Anyone who went through these hard times becomes an encourager to those afflicted by discouragements in various forms of life. Nyambura thus became I believe the first Kenyan and among the first African women to attain a PhD in Theology. And as she represented the Presbyterian women in an international forum while she was still at St Paul's, she was now to become a women's voice in both church and society through the World Council of Churches.

### **The Cosmopolitan Nature of St Paul's**

During Nyambura's time at St Paul's, the College was very cosmopolitan. We had students from Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Sudan, South Africa, Mozambique, West Germany, United Kingdom and United States of America. This cosmopolitan nature was brought about by several factors: First, there was the ecumenical nature as every student had been sponsored by the various Protestant denominations that trained there, whether local or international. Second, the College was then said to be the most prestigious and popular theological institution in Eastern Africa. Third, there had been political crises mainly in Uganda and Mozambique. A good number of the international students were therefore refugees from the region.

Each of the above factors impacted any student who went through St Paul's then. In 1949, the College that had been owned by the Anglican Church invited the Presbyterian Church of East Africa and the Methodist Church of Kenya, both of British origin, to come and train together. The number of students who were enrolling for theological training was minimal and was only prudent for the three denominations to train together for mutual assistance. Later in 1955, the College became a United Theological College of course through a memorandum of understanding. At this time the college was open to inviting other denominations with common theological orientation, especially from those churches which were members of the National Council of Churches of Kenya [NCCCK].

This ecumenical nature of St Paul's assisted the graduates and their denomination in narrowing down some of the historical differences that had existed between them. Every student was assigned a church to attend to

experience how that church performed their services and even to participate on sermon delivery, whether that was one's denomination or not. Denominations alternated in conducting Sunday evening communion services in the College chapel. Any graduate of St Paul's would not have any problem later in serving in a participating denomination that was not their own. This was one of the uniqueness of Nyambura's theological formation. African scholars came to learn that some of the differences that various denominations had imported through the Western missionaries could be dealt away with. They were to be cautious against propagating the same differences when they graduated to serve the wider church and society in their respective countries. This was the fulfillment of the dream by the Church Council of Kenya, the precursor of the NCKK that had advocated for a united Kenyan church during the early years of the last century. Later, all the chief executives, the general secretaries of the NCKK were to come from the three main partner denominations. A good number of St Paul's graduates have taken active roles in ecumenical organizations such as National Council of Churches of Kenya, All Africa Council of Churches [AACC] and the World Council of Churches [WCC]. This could have been the genesis of Nyambura's passion to work with the WCC.

One may argue that St Paul's had become popular because of the balanced theological training that it gave to its graduates. There were lecturers sponsored by the Anglican Church, the PCEA, the Methodist Church of Kenya and the Reformed Church of East Africa. During Nyambura's time at St Paul's there were more expatriate lecturers than their local counterparts. The nationalities of the students have already been mentioned. This culture mixture brought about new insight to each of the students most of whom had come from their local homogenous cultures.

Students were to tolerate each other's cultures, however, complicated some may have appeared to others. For example, it is anathema for certain Kenyan communities to eat certain types of meat. In our small gardens which the college was allocating to married students, our greatest enemy was a small mammal called the porcupine. They used to eat up the crops which were meant to supplement students' food supply. Some Kenyans used to trap them, kill them and throw them away or even bury them. For our Mozambique counterparts, it was their delicacy. Whoever was lucky to catch one, he had to invite other members of their community to share the meat from the small mammal. This demonstrated a lot of love

between them. This is just one example that members of St Paul's community were to learn from each other's culture. The members learnt even to carry each other's burdens and also to appreciate each other's culture. Students had truly become members of one body where if one part suffered the rest of the body was to respond to the pain.

## **The Refugees Factor**

Among the foreign students were refugees from Uganda and Mozambique. Kenya since the 1970s has been a refuge to a number of countries in the Eastern African region thanks to its relatively democratically elected governments. It has two of the world biggest refugee camps at Kakuma at the Kenya/Sudan and Dadaab at the Kenya/Somalia borders respectively. Both camps provide education to the children who have fled their countries with their relatives. There are also those who took the opportunity to seek college education, some of whom found their way to St Paul's. Their life in college and in Kenya was relatively more comfortable compared to their war-torn states. Because of its deep spirituality, St Paul's offered compassion to the refugees when they shared their horrific experiences with their Kenyan and international counterparts. Some, especially from Uganda, would receive news of the deaths of their relatives.

Some of these experiences occurred when one Ugandan student failed to return in college after an official term break. When he came back, he was summoned by the Principal in his office and was given a suspension order to go back 'home'. The news of his suspension reached the General Student Body [GSB]. This was an official body that addressed issues of students' welfare in college. The senior student convened a GSB Executive Committee comprising twelve elected members which decided to go and see the Principal to persuade him to reconsider the decision to send the refugee student home. This was during the time when the country's military dictator, Idi Amin Dada was targeting Christian leaders.<sup>3</sup> The Principal refused to meet these student representatives. They passed the message to the GSB who in turn demanded that the Principal should come and address all the students. He was unwilling to discuss the matter of the student in question with anybody. This caused all the students to boycott classes in solidarity with the refugee. The darkest moment came

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<sup>3</sup> The Archbishop the Church of Uganda' Jenani Luwum was murdered around this time.

when the Principal convened a meeting of the College Council Executive which was to be chaired by the Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Mount Kenya South mentioned above who was also the Chairman of the College Finance Committee.

There had been reports that the students had gone violent and had broken the library windows and had cut the college telephone wires. All these were fabrications and none of the Council members had sought to verify the truth. All the students were summoned to the main hall at 4 pm and the Council had decided all the students were to go 'home' and report to their respective church leaders. By the time the students came out of the hall, police officers were at every corner of the college, especially around the library which allegedly had its windows broken. The police officers were however calm as they had not witnessed the alleged violence and did not push anyone to moving out.

But unlike any other Kenyan institution, the situation was to become very complex. A good number of the students' wives were either teachers in the neighboring schools or nurses at Tigoni Hospital or doing secretarial or banking jobs in Nairobi and were all to arrive home after 5 pm. There was a host of school going children from the married students who normally returned home with their parents. None of these persons were St Paul's students but they were to be punished with their husbands and fathers respectively.

But the worst scenario was with the international students, among them American, German and British, and from other African countries named above. Those who had embassies in Kenya went to their respective foreign offices in Nairobi to seek for help. All the Mozambican students all of whom happened to be Methodists went to the Methodist Church of Kenya's leadership and were all hosted at the Methodist Guest House, a three-star hotel.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the Ugandan students had been sponsored by the African Evangelistic Enterprise [AEE] and were to seek help from the organization's office in Nairobi. The suspended student now enjoying the sympathy of all the others had been sponsored by AEE. Efforts

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<sup>4</sup> These refugee students later boasted that the two weeks accommodation at the Methodist Guest House was a God-given opportunity as they had never dreamt of being in such a prestigious hotel.

by GSB to send fourteen of its members to persuade its General Secretary to intercede for the student were rendered fruitless.<sup>5</sup>

But it took a very short time for the Council members to realize that the Principal was wrong and had not given them the real truth. When the Bishop of Mount Kenya South summoned his eight students for interrogation, he ended the subject by saying to his students: "We have realized that even the Principal can be wrong, go back to college and complete your studies so that you can come and serve God." All the other church leaders ordered their students to go back to college unconditionally.

Nyambura was a student leader and had been engaged with all the pleadings for compassion over her fellow refugee student who had been between a rock and a hard place. At home his people were dying and in a Christian college, he had been sent away. The suspension of the Ugandan refugee must have impacted her to later work on the plight of the refugees and the marginalized in the World Council of Churches and to insist on justice and abundant life for all.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed some of the Rev Dr Nyambura Njoroge's early beginnings. Her calling to the ordained ministry from a family of an ordained father and six sisters was a fulfillment of a dream of a father who had longed to have a son so that one day he would be a priest. His daughter was to fulfill the dream and not a 'son.' Nyambura was later to wear the face of a son during her early theological training in a male dominated institution.

Nyambura's discouragements at St Paul's made her create a hard skin towards achieving the highest level of academia. This led her to joining the prestigious Princeton University for her master and doctorate degrees. She became the first woman PhD holder and one of the world's leading scholar.

Nyambura, having been sponsored by the PCEA, both at St Paul's and in America, was to become the greatest gift that her Church was to give to

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<sup>5</sup> The General Secretary was a former classmate of the Principal and instead of interceding for his sponsored student he decided to discuss the list of all the fourteen emissaries who had gone to see him. The emissaries' list was to be given to the Council with the recommendation that they all should be expelled from St Paul's.

the world. Through her, many young scholars, especially women, were to enjoy generous scholarships from the WCC.

Training in a cosmopolitan college with all its complexities at her early beginnings exposed Nyambura to hard times, some of which were to shape her future engagements in church and society. Being the only Kenyan woman in a male dominated institution and observing the refugees' struggle got into her psyche. This was to become a motivation in her engagements in gender, struggling with the marginalized, especially in the global South. I hope this chapter has thrown some light to some of Dr Njoroge's early beginnings that prepared her for her future engagements in the global political and economic developments.