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Women in Ordained Ministry

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY
Nkesiga, Diana Mirembe. *Woven in Spirals: The Journey of an African Woman to the Priesthood*. Kampala, Uganda: Beta Inspiration, 2019.[1]

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Rev. Canon Diana M. Nkesiga was asked, "Do women go into full-time ordained ministry?" *Woven in Spirals* is her response, answering this question not in academic abstraction but through her narrated lived experience. The book opens with high drama. The ordination of Diana Mirembe Nkesiga to the Anglican priesthood signalled a thawing position on the ordination of women in the Church of Uganda, which had her in the frozen states of 'church worker' and deacon. She recounts, "I rose off my knees, as a priest of the church" to the gentle whisper of Rev. Canon Ernest Kibuuka, as he loosened her stole over her shoulders from the right side where it had hung since 1991, "*hmm, mwana wange, ekibo bakiluka nga kyetolola*" (Luganda: 'hmmm, my child, a basket is woven in spirals') (2–3). These words remain an apt depiction Diana's journey.

While her clergy brothers arrived at priesthood in two years, it took her five, and with drama when the time came. The Rt. Rev. Misaeri Kauma invited her back to Uganda from South Africa to be ordained as a priest, but the function stalled because the bishop retired that year. Diana narrates the agony of the in-between, awaiting the new Bishop Samuel Balagadde Sekadde to restart the process of ordaining a woman to pastoral ministry on his terms. She quips, "The spirals weaved during this time have been both deep and wide, and I want to believe colourful!" (7).

Diana narrates the discovery of identity and calling through the lens of her upbringing and family lineage. She was the secondborn of Edward Hugo Sematimba Barlow, the Kabanyolo University Farm manager, and Mary Nantongo a teacher. Like most teenagers, Diana had an identity crisis expressed

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in a change of name. Although her parents named her *Mirembe,* meaning 'peace' or 'freedom' in Luganda, she explains, "I changed to using my middle name Diana, as a typical teenager and through peer pressure, so that God could have the pleasure of redeeming the goddess of hunting" (12).

A teenager during Idi Amin's reign, Diana shared her country's apocalyptic angst. She discusses the uncertainty and unpredictability of life in Uganda, an era characterized by fear, accentuated by the 1977 murder of Archbishop Janani Luwum. Meanwhile, this pulsating anxiety nudged her to God. With the Gayaza Christian community, as they implored for divine intervention, she explains "the teachers organized the first-ever official night of prayer . . . The decision by the Christian staff helped us remain anchored to Christ and kept us returning to the staff for answers" (14). Later at Gayaza High School, as a young teacher, Diana claims, "I encountered what would spiral me onto the road to ordination" (14).

She later realized that this impulse for ordained ministry draws from deep wells. Church service ran deep in Diana's family line. Her great-grandfather Mikka Makamba Ssematimba, who despite being a confidant to Kabaka (King) Mwanga of Buganda, was an ardent Christian who pushed his family to serve God. Mikka took part in translating the gospel of John into Luganda. Her grandfather, John Barlow, prayed that one of his five sons would take up ordained ministry. Although not one of John's sons took clerical orders, his granddaughter Diana's vocation fulfilled this desire.

After graduating from Kyambogo National Teacher Training College, Diana recounts her unsettlement, as she began a teaching career at Gayaza Girls. She returned to the scene of her extraordinary encounter with God at age fourteen, an experience which changed her and transformed "a shy, awkward teen, with low self-esteem, into a courageous individual who felt loved and valued" (15). Here, her leadership was birthed.

Her experience as assistant chaplain counselling many young girls assaulted during the war to oust Iddi Amin in 1979, confronted her "with a pain and injustice I had never faced" (16). Their ordeal, including sexual assault, rape, and other brutality, horrified and made her angry. In seeking answers, Diana was exposed to experiences of extreme prejudice, injustice, and inequalities against the female gender. She thought training in theology would answer her questions.

Her thought of joining theological training caused unease in her confidants. She describes their reluctance thus, "I got prompts like, 'Isn't it about that time you got married?' Or remarks like, 'Do women go into full-time ordained ministry?' 'This is an unchartered territory for women, isn't there a safer option?'" (17). Some in her family worried about that she would remain

unmarried. Despite lukewarm support, she enrolled at Bishop Tucker Theological College (BTTC, today Uganda Christian University) in 1986. Rather than answering all of her questions, theological training brought new ones to Diana. She struggled for the first time with gender issues, and it is here that her identity struggles were heightened. Here too was her first encounter with the face of HIV-AIDS, laying the ground for her later ministry in South Africa. Diana had to learn to fight for equality.

Diana discusses her entry into theological school, class of '86, in chapter 4 and what became of her classmates in chapter 8. When she joined BTTC, twenty-nine years had passed since Florence Septume Njangali had become the first woman student to enroll in any Ugandan theological college. Nkesiga writes, "Three decades later, nothing had changed, except that the exclusion had become more sophisticated, more subtle, and the opportunity felt more like window dressing" (19).

The Church of Uganda (Anglican), then, and the college remained "unconvinced by the theological debate supporting women's training for ordination" (20). Thus, any woman walking through the gates of BTTC as a student felt the "unspoken disapproval" (20). Diana and Florence Adong were the only ladies in a class with eighteen men. Although the two ladies were not physically banished to study on the veranda as Rev Florence Njangali had been twenty-nine years before, Diana's exclusion meant that she "sat alone in the front row . . . like an alien treated with suspicion with no one daring to sit next to me" (25). She discusses a woman's experience in a male-dominated bible school, particularly being the subject of debate in between lectures. Diana sensed her presence was an unwanted intrusion. But this eventually changed.

This class of '86 became the crucible which forged Diana into a warrior with a unique sense of "love, justice, righteousness, sin and suffering" (65). She credits Dr Amos Kasibante for shaking them out of holding simple assumptions about life into deeply probing issues. She discusses her successful class, a rare group of graduates serving in extraordinary circumstances who became high-calibre clergy for the church.

The college experience had made Diana an open and assertive woman which caused disquiet among the church leadership. Even though the attitudes towards women in ministry shifted positively at the time of Diana's graduation, at least in the college, this book reveals a different story with church ministry. As she prepared for her final exams, she recounts a disturbing episode: "I learned that the two clergy from Namirembe Diocese, my sending diocese, were being prepared for ordination in secret before the set date" (29). She confronted the ordaining bishop asking: "Why was this very important religious rite being brought forward to such a peculiar time? And why I was being omitted from

being part of the process?" (29). She was not given a straight answer, but that December, while the men of her class were ordained as deacons, she was commissioned as a 'Church Worker', a designation never given to a male minister, which she calls in this book, "an undefined role created to displace the women who desired to join full-time ministry" (30).

In August 1989, Diana married a former classmate at BTTC, Rev Dr Solomon Nkesiga. Being married, she observes, did not shield her from discrimination in the diocesan service. She soon noted that her pay was half the salary of fellow tutors, despite having better qualifications, a holder of a bachelor's degree in divinity (BD) and a diploma in education. She enlisted Solomon to confront this discrimination and appealed to Bishop Kauma who resolved the issue.

The practice of commissioning women as 'Church Workers' was dropped in 1990 when the Church of Uganda unanimously accepted that women could be ordained deacons and priests. Until then, only the diocese of Kigezi under Bishop Festo Kivengere ordained women to the diaconate and priesthood. Kigezi ordained its first female priest in 1983. Because of the principle of autonomy of dioceses, Kigezi was free to order its own diocesan affairs, thereby become the first diocese in Uganda to approve the ordination of women. The diocese of Namirembe, where Diana would be ordained, resolved to ordain women into the diaconate in 1991, eight years after the Kigezi diocese had ordained its first women to the priesthood.

This cleared the way for Diana to be added to the ordinand list for new deacons in 1992. However, her name was quietly withdrawn on the discovery of her pregnancy. A pregnancy debate ensued, degenerating into ". . . women being unclean through their menstrual cycle, Leviticus 15:19–33, and therefore unable to celebrate Holy Communion" (32). She aptly challenges these positions, mounting a convincing defense in this book. Diana contends, "All these are man-made exclusions etched in the day's culture" (33). In her struggle against the exclusion of women in the church over the years, she won many male compatriots, as acknowledged in her book. These men supported and aided her ministry, foremost among them is her husband, Rev Dr Solomon Nkesiga, her cheerleader and one who shared her frustration. But she was finally ordained as a deacon before the end of 1992.

If one imagined that the Church of Uganda's institutions, such as BTTC or the dioceses, a cut above the preclusion of women in ministry, Diana chronicles subtle exclusion in South Africa. Solomon and Diana went to South Africa at the end of 1992, which was a high drama for Diana (41–51). Whereas Solomon was absorbed in immediate deployment, Diana had to wait. The irony is that South Africans and her fellow Ugandans, serving in the same diocese at Ugie in

South Africa's Eastern Cape, championed the delays and exclusion she experienced. Though denied full recognition of her vocational calling, she continued faithfully in active Christian service. She describes this time of active waiting:

> As I waited for both acceptance and deployment, I served in the community as an HIV-AIDS activist, mobilizing schools and business owners, partnering with the hospital, local chiefs, health workers and pastors raising awareness at the family planning clinics and in the churches. I knew how to keep myself busy. For me AIDS was a serious battle, one we had to take by the horns. It was a life and death situation, and I would fight it to the very last. (40)

She was called back to Uganda briefly in 1994 when she was ordained as a priest. But back in South Africa, her ecclesial status was largely ignored. Until she represented the Port Elizabeth diocese at the all-black post-apartheid Anglican clergy conference in Johannesburg, she remained obscure. Diana had often been "bypassed for minor reasons like my tribe, my gender, my nationality or my forthrightness" (50). And with no explanation her name was withdrawn from being made a canon even though the bishop had prepared her. Over this and more, she concluded: "I was not only a woman, but a foreigner, I suppose, being an unrecognized missionary didn't count much. The exclusions go on and on, and the spiral spins deeper and deeper, but the ministry and service continue" (51). Then at the 1995 conference in Johannesburg, Archbishop Desmond Tutu arranged for her to celebrate the Eucharist, and the archbishop was the first to receive from her. A picture published of her with the archbishop at the conference marked a turning point for her vocational career.

For its adventure, Solomon urged Diana to mark her tenth year of priesthood with a thanksgiving Service. She had been serving as a teacher, but with a missionary designation as supporting priest to Solomon at St Agnes Church in the parish of Swartkops River Valley, Port Elizabeth in South Africa. She reflects on this stage of her journey, including her 28 November 2004 speech during the service.

Diana holds a mirror to the Church, questioning our attitudes towards 'the other'. As her journey began, not with the glamorous prospect of the vocation, but with the calling to be God's servant, in the *Woven in Spirals*, Canon Diana is calling us to dare to open our ears to the Lord who calls our attention to the people around us. In this book, Diana has demonstrated that women are called to full-time ministry. When we, like her — whether men or women —respond to the impulse to serve God, we may discover our hidden talents. Since God calls women, men must ordain them!