



**International Ecumenical Movement - Kenya Chapter (IEM-Kenya)**

## **ROUND TABLE REPORT**

### **THEME: A SIMPLER LIFESTYLE**

*Should Christians Aspire to it?*

**What is meant by living simply?**

**Why should we live simply?**

**How should we react to the prosperity gospel?**

**How can living simply be promoted/actualized?**

**DISCUSSANTS: Mr. George Macgoye, Mrs. Ingrid Munro,  
Br. Luc (Taizé community), Little Sisters of Jesus**

**FACILITATOR: Rev. John Gatu (PCEA Loresho Community Church)**

**VENUE: Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church, Nairobi South B**

**DATE: Saturday, 29 October 2016 (3.00–5.00 p.m.)**

***“That they may be completely one...” (John 17:23)***

## SUMMARY

The theme of the Round Table held on 29 October 2016 was: **A simpler lifestyle: should Christians aspire to it?** Attended by over 40 participants from different denominations and religious organizations; different views were offered on this timely topic. Below are a few highlights, followed by detailed notes of the discussants' presentations.

### Some highlights

#### What is meant by living simply and why should we live simply?

- Simplicity is letting go of everything that hinders us from reaching God and others;
- Simplicity of life as a reflection of inward simplicity will result in integrity in our relationships and in our language;
- Simplicity leads to freedom; there is no fear of theft when our material possessions are few;
- Sharing with the poor is a way to heal one's heart of selfishness and fears;
- Through poverty of spirit, we become aware of how much we are in need of God's help;
- Poverty is the way of God to man and the way of men towards their brothers;
- We need to live simply so that others can simply live (see "gratefulness.org");
- Surrendering our lives to God in service, we become welcoming of others.

#### How can living simply be promoted/actualized?

- By building relationships across barriers of race, tribe and religion; by being **with** the people, "smelling like the sheep" (Pope Francis);
- By being human before being Christian;
- By starting to make a difference in one's personal life before aspiring to change society.

#### How should we react to the prosperity gospel?

- The prosperity gospel puts one on a collision path with peace: people are no longer seen as partners but as sources of income or profit.
- Wealth is not evil (we need resources to preach the gospel) but the question is: to what **use** do you put your wealth? What you are given is not for your use alone: everything we have belongs to God.

## INTRODUCTION

The session started with a word of welcome followed by a hymn. Fr. Kevin read the poem "Round Table" (by Chuck Lathrop) before leading us in an opening prayer.

## DISCUSSANT REFLECTIONS ON A SIMPLER LIFESTYLE FOR CHRISTIANS

### **Mr. George Macgoye**

#### His take on living simply and why we should live simply

Drawing much of his presentation from his upbringing, George used many examples from the simple lifestyle that his late mother, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, followed in bringing up her family (see also the story of his brother, Francis Oludhe in the Annex).

According to Mr. MacGoye, a simple life is one that has no entanglements, is geared to the natural self and is free from attachment to the many modern gadgets. Entanglements hinder the sharing of peace among people: we are called to peace and to make time for each other.

Simple living should start being practiced at the family level; it can then flow to the community and to national levels. Education in boarding schools tends to distort the family value system. When young people move from home they lose their accountability structures and enter into complex systems where they merge with the world they find themselves in. The prosperity gospel (promoted by many preachers in Kenya) is a war path against peace: people are no longer seen as equal partners but as a source of income or profit.

The simple life that Marjorie lived included:

- No television in the sitting room, thus promoting conversation;
- Sharing food with anyone who dropped in—everyone in the family would adjust their portion to make sure the visitor shared in the food equally;
- Welcoming street boys to take showers in the house;
- Providing the children with only 2-3 sets of clothes that were good but not extra-ordinary or expensive;
- Encouraging the children to have friends from across economic classes, for example from the Mathare slum;
- Avoiding to send the children to special schools (to which they could have had access, their mother being European) and putting them in schools for African children;
- Supporting needy relatives and others with problems, especially by paying school fees.

**Mrs. Ingrid Munro**

Ingrid's life experiences have brought her full circle from the life of a leading executive with national influence in her country, then working with the U.N. in Africa, to learning simplicity from street families while building a successful financial institution to meet their needs. As a young civil servant she became a leading architect and urban planner, a rare achievement for a woman in those days in Europe. She was often quoted in the media whenever she opened her mouth; however, she told us that her grandmother kept reminding her: "Remember you are still my little Ingrid!"

All was going very well for her until she was diagnosed with cancer in her early 40s. This was a wakeup call! She began to ask herself the deeper questions of life: What have I done for God to treat me as special? Was that all he had expected of me? And having been brought up in the Christian faith; she prayed: "God, tell me what to do and I will do it."

However, she did not slow down and went on to take another job as the first woman to head a Parastatal organization in her country. Then she fell sick again and at this point realized she was not listening to God. It was around this time that an opportunity opened up to work for UN-Habitat in Africa in connection with the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987. While on this job, she travelled widely and saw much poverty and homelessness. Having left the U.N., she started working for the Africa Housing Fund. During this time, something happened that changed her life forever. A street boy (Waithaka), had been involved in an accident and the advice of her father, a medical doctor, was sought. His advice was followed but then Ingrid decided to take care of Waithaka. Later she and her husband Bob made the decision to adopt him. Waithaka taught Ingrid how to see the world with new eyes. He kept bringing his friends home, so Ingrid started a home for these street children. As happens with mothers, she became friends with the mothers of these children. She then realized that she had to do something for them. In this way Jamii Bora was born, starting with the fifty or so street women, the mothers of Waithaka's friends.

Ingrid ended her story by posing the question of why there are no beggars outside churches, yet they are always near mosques. Is it because we do not give? Or because we chase them away? According to her, it is not enough to live a simple life or feel sorry for the poor, to pray for them and give them handouts. Claiming to be Christians, we should not sleep when so many people around us live in miserable circumstances. It is our duty to help them. Ingrid challenged us: it is time to wake up instead and see the potential among the poor! They have talents and there are many things they can do. The poor are held back by the rich and the powerful. Let the disadvantaged in society know they can make it, they can come out of poverty. Then in their turn they can assist other poor people.

### **Br. Luc (Taize Community)**

#### What is meant by living simply and why should we live simply?

- Jesus calls his disciples to be perfect; "Go sell all your possessions and give to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me." The freedom and availability provided by this call causes a deepening of one's identity: I am not what I own, my property, my titles, my past. Rather, I am determined by the **aim** I choose for my life, the vision of the One who calls me. But we should realize that asceticism cut off from the living source of the heart leads nowhere. "When I give all I possess in charity, if I do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13: 3);
- On the way to follow Jesus, I discover my fundamental incapacity. I am not able to make a single step by myself. In truth, I am poor before God and men. I am not the source of the forgiveness, the peace of heart, the joy, the love, the hope that I need every day to live in a broken world with other people equally poor. But this fundamental poverty is not a misfortune, a curse, a shame: it is a blessing and a promise. "Blessed are the poor in heart for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." This poverty can be visited and inhabited by another One, it may become available to others and become the capacity for communion and for building relationships. In this process I discover the meaning of my life.

- Abraham heard God's call. Since that very moment he received the gift of his friendship, his presence, his expectation, his confidence, he experienced communion with Him. He believed and left his country, culture, beliefs, traditions, not because he knew that blessings would come his way, but by believing God that would take care of him. It makes sense to let go of what is left behind. However, simplification is fruitful only if we first welcome the overflowing gift of God himself;
- Simplicity is the companion of the missionary. "John the Baptist wore a camel skin and ate locusts." Poverty is the way of God to man and the way of men towards their brothers. If we claim to know how to pray, how to love, to believe, through our own knowledge, our life experience, our expertise, our personal discipline, we prevent the truth in Christ and ourselves. We maintain the illusion that there are privileged people with access to intimacy with God and we could lead to despair of those who, aware of their inability, will judge themselves unfit and abandon any search; they will then miss the discovery of their true identity and vocation;
- Simplicity is an expression of who I am deep down, it is the way to "prepare the way for the Lord," who said: "Take nothing with you." In Jesus, God made himself poor to reach each one of us.

#### How can living simply be promoted/actualized?

- By simplifying my use of time: Identify a priority: what matters most to me? For example, if I work less, I can be available for other activities; if I do not have a TV, I can read and choose my sources and my fields of information;
- By simplifying my relationships: Whom am I engaged with first? For whom am I responsible? For whom do I live? Who is waiting for me the most? Who most needs me?
- By simplifying my lifestyle: Refusing the logic of competition opens the way for developing a diversity of relationships. Not owning a car, taking public transport instead, gives us the chance to get close to the daily life of people. In the case of Taize community, not having domestic workers gives us the opportunity to share household duties and activities – like going to the market, cooking and laundry – with our guests.

#### **Little Sisters of Jesus**

Founded by Little Brother Charles de Foucauld, the Little Sisters live simplicity as their call. In this they imitate Jesus who became poor for us: He left his glory with the Father and lived a hidden life before beginning his public ministry. In the same manner, leaving his wealthy family behind, Br. Charles wanted to be a brother to everyone. He lived a simple life of prayer. He told his followers that the Christ in the Eucharist is the same Christ in the person who needs you, so if a person comes to you during adoration, you must go and attend to his need. The Sisters live in marginalized areas with the poor, journeying together with them, sharing their joys and sorrows. They have found that there is a power that accompanies simplicity. Simplicity breaks barriers of religion, race and tribe: it allows us to "be human first before being Christian." Christianity finds a solid ground when we are human first.

## **PLENARY CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

- Simplicity is living a balanced life: no extravagance or show off;
- Be like Jesus who welcomed all and preached simply so that everyone could understand;
- Do the young people know simplicity? Many want to get rich quick and admire leaders with wealth, such as politicians;
- “Make God your gold” (Job 22:24). The message of Jesus is radical and calls for a complete transformation;
- Being able to access wealth but choosing not to, for a higher reason;
- There is no merit in giving away what you do not need;
- Simplicity requires a personal decision under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit;
- Aligning one’s inner and outer spirituality;
- Simplicity means to be focused on Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, ecumenism and eschatology (see [www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-errors-of-the-prosperity-gospel](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-errors-of-the-prosperity-gospel))
- Help people holistically, not just giving handouts and telling them not to come back;
- Is simplicity minimal living—with only the basics? What is the difference between poverty and a simple life? Poverty is not admirable and simple living is not natural to human nature; we therefore need to pray for the grace to live simply;
- Jesus is our example, he did not discriminate between the rich and the poor. He came for all of them and spent time with all of them;
- The poor are afraid to go to church they do not have shoes, suits, make-up!

## **CONCLUSION**

Elder Solomon Gacece made the closing remarks. After this, an offering was taken and Dr. Ng’ang’a Gicumbi gave a vote of thanks. Rev. Patrick Kangentu said the closing prayer. The participants were then able to enjoy the refreshments kindly provided by the host church.

## ANNEX

### **The Simple Life of Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye**

#### **Francis Oludhe**

My mother, Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye died on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2015 at her simple home in Ngara, Nairobi having lived in the same flat for 40 years. She first moved there in April 1975 on our return to Kenya from Dar es Salaam where she had lived and worked for four years.

There was nothing grand about the flat. It was furnished simply and had much of the same furniture she had bought when she first moved in. The dining table and dining chairs were the same. She had the same stools she had bought from the APDK (Association for the Physically Disabled of Kenya) workshop in 1975. Her bed was the same. She did not like updating for the sake of it or to 'keep up with the Joneses'. She never would have liked to have a TV in the house, although for a few years we had one in the children's bedroom. She considered it 'an instrument of the devil' as it broke conversations and made many families center their lives around it. Many of her kitchen implements she had used since getting married: some were wedding gifts. Some of her china she had been given by an aunt when she first came to Kenya in 1954 and she still used it. And it is still usable today! Some of her cutlery was silver; she had been given it as a young lady and although not regularly polished, was still used at the dinner table.

Many wondered why she had never bought a house or a car. Why did she live simply? She lived by the creed she had been brought up by: 'waste not, want not,' as well as the creed of Jesus Christ, that Christians (followers of Christ) should live by His example. The example of Christ was not to build up worldly possessions, but 'to seek first His Kingdom and the rest shall be added unto you.' She lived by these two creeds all of her life.

George, my brother, likes to recount as we grew up and had our birthdays, we never had a party as a family. The birthday party was taken to an orphanage and we shared the celebration with the needy and less fortunate. We still had the birthday celebration, but it was a celebration to be shared with those not able to enjoy what we could. Thus we learned the joy of sharing and giving. I am sure he will be able to recount other such instances to you. The parties were not lavish but there was plenty to go round and everyone shared in the fare, just like the stories in the Bible where Jesus shared what there was with everyone: everyone had the same. Mom lived by the creed of sharing, and sharing it in a simple way.

Mom lived a simple life to enable us and others to share what she was in a position to offer as generously as she could: she paid the school and college fees for countless relatives and people who knocked on her door. But at the same time she did not begrudge her children [anything necessary] and we never lacked for anything. She did not buy us expensive stationery or clothes but she saw to it that we were always fed and dressed reasonably.

Another reason she lived a simple life was also because of the generation she was brought up in. Anyone who lived in Europe through the Second World War and the depression years knows

that life was tough and that food and clothing were rationed. You could only have so much of anything and nothing was wasted. Bones left over from meals were made into soup. Peelings were used to make broth and you never ever left any food on your plate: you had to finish what you were served with! We were brought up like this and Mom never liked waste of any sort. She was not an extravagant dresser and only had a handful of dresses. When people would give her presents of clothing items a lot of them would end up going to a needy person who had no clothes, following Jesus' command in Matthew 25 verse 36 –'I was naked and you clothed me'.

She never felt in need despite having led a simple life, she had all she wanted, most of all her faith. But she had a roof over her head, she had friends, she had fellowship with others (relatives and neighbors) and she also had her children, who have always been there for her. She loved and cherished her family and taught them the values she had nurtured all her life. This is part of her legacy. She always taught us to never borrow or lend as it would lead to mistrust and breaking of friendships. She 'lent' people in need money, but never expected it to be paid back. I know of several occasions she lent someone money and told them not to repay it directly to her but the payback was to be in the form of helping someone else, or helping educate a fellow sibling rather than paying it back, and then returning for another 'loan'.

Mom was happy in her simple lifestyle and never had to be anxious about people trying to break into her house to rob her; they all knew there was nothing worthwhile stealing. She was also happy helping others. She never felt the need for more worldly goods or money as she realized early in life the vanity of worldly possessions. When she was blessed with various large sums of money she would often use it to help others. The money her father left her when he died went into a bursary fund for less able students at CITC (Christian Industrial Training Centre), and many students benefitted from this. It was a cause close to her heart as it was started by her dear missionary friends, Helen and Charles Tett.

Mom did not feel she had to worship God in an ostentatious church or cathedral: she chose to worship him in the humble church of St John's Pumwani, where she was married in 1960, and worshipped there from her return to Nairobi in 1975 until one month before her death. She did not mind that she was the only non-black person in the congregation. After all Christ was born in a humble stable; was [her lifestyle] not her reflection of His humble status and station in life?

Her writings were those of ordinary lives: humble and sometimes insignificant. But this is what she chose to capture as she was able to identify with it. Her own upbringing in the port city of Southampton was quite humble though her cousins do not concur with this and feel that as she was an only child she had some privileges that they did not have; they had been brought up with siblings and the need to share. This may have been the case, to some extent, but her parents were prudent in their own right. Although her mother was a trained teacher, she had to give up her profession when she got married to her husband (Mom's father), as it was not right for a married woman to work with so much unemployment around. Her father was a clerk at the Vosper and Thornycraft dockyards. He had to leave school at 12, but was a bright lad. His younger siblings also worked at the docks, but they only had menial jobs. This may have caused some friction, but he was also a generous man and assisted his siblings in times of need. From this example of her



modest father and humble mother, Mom had learnt much in terms of a simple life. She also learnt much from her maternal grandparents who lived with them as she grew up, and her love of telling stories comes from her close relationship with her maternal grandfather, who sang a lot and told her many stories.

She would not have been able to write her stories and fulfill her life had she lived in any other way. She did not interfere with the way others chose to lead their lives, but admired those who chose and lived the way of simplicity.

The lives of many great people are lived through living a simple lifestyle. Think of Christ himself as being the greatest picture of simplicity. Think of the impact Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi has had by adopting a simple lifestyle. I do not think if he had lived in a palace he would have had as much impact!

She did not miss out on achieving her goals in life: raising a family and living in happiness with her neighbors, children and grandchildren- in spite of living the simple life. I think the lesson here is that one can be happy and achieve a lot without amassing great amounts of wealth which many Kenyans believe is the source of all happiness.

To put it simply: Mom's life was her testimony, and a testimony of her faith and belief in Christ.

I trust that George will have a few tales to share with you on Mom's simple lifestyle and what impact it has had on us and others! He will tell you about the parking boys she would bring home and bathe and feed, the soap she washed our mouths with if we swore or used inappropriate language, the friendships she would foster with Muthoni who owned the kiosk next to our house or Jane a drug addict she helped rehabilitate, etc.

Francis Oludhe

21-10- 2016 (this would have been Mom's 88<sup>th</sup> birthday).