



Fred Nyabera  
Director, Arigatou International - End Child  
Poverty

## Acceptance speech at the 'Spirit of the UN' award ceremony

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2019 | 777 church center chapel, New York

## **Thank you all... for those kind words.**

I am humbled and honored to accept the "Spirit of the UN" award, and join previous recipients, some of whom I have long admired and respected. Very special thanks goes to the Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns (CSVGC-NY) for selecting me. I also wish to express deep respect to all of this year's nominees, each of whom have made incredible contributions to advancing the Spirit of the UN.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I know that you are paying tribute not only to me, but also to the work of Arigatou International – as we strive to create a better world for children. In this light, I would like to recognise the visionary leadership of my President Rev. Keishi Miyamoto - represented here by his son, Hironari Miyamoto. I would also like to recognise my colleagues from our Offices in Tokyo, New York, Geneva and Nairobi - represented here by Rebeca Rios Kohn and Eileen Russo. I wish to thank my wife, friends and family represented here today by my daughter Akwe. Thank you all for your support and for being here today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, for the most part of my adult life, I have worked on a wide range of causes... seeking the authenticity, relevance and practical application of my faith. These have been within the local church context as a pastor, in the conflict transformation and the peacebuilding world, and in seeking to create a better world for children. In all these spaces, I have always asked myself...is my faith authentic? Is it relevant to the context I am in? and is it practical?

Over the past 5 years, I have asked these 3 questions within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). Globally, one of the platforms I have stood on as I ask these 3 questions has been the Moral Imperative to End Extreme Poverty – a platform that brings together religious actors and the multilaterals to advance a faith-based action to end extreme poverty and realize the SDGs. I have unwaveringly stood on this platform because of the Moral Imperative's potential to offer a

credible voice in the global discussions regarding the 2030 Development Agenda. Especially in its call to a holistic approach, rooted in the spiritual visions of our respective faiths, and built on a shared recognition of the intrinsic dignity and value of every life on earth.

About two months ago I received a WhatsApp message from one of our partners from the Global Network of Religions for Children - Malaysia – Ms. Shazmin Rafeeq. The message from Shazmin read as follows: "If you don't mind... can you send me an audio message of yourself on how you started this noble work with children? I'm writing an article about you" and then she continued... "I mean just do it casually, just record it and then I'll pick it up". Apart from wondering why someone in Malaysia would want to write about me...my immediate dilemma was to figure out how to condense more than 20 years of my journey in faith and development work into a short WhatsApp voice message? Then I realized that I am in a communication space where most young people are in, and I had to adapt. So, I adapted, and I was able to incapsulate my journey into three broad reasons for doing what I am doing.

### **Three reasons why I am involved in creating a better world for children**

#### **First, is the conviction derived from my FAITH**

There is a strong consensus across our religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every person, including children. According to my faith tradition – Christianity, all human beings, children included... enjoy special status and dignity in creation. The basis of this claim is in the bible, in the book of Genesis 1:27. This requires that we protect and promote the sanctity of life in every stage of human development. This calls us to be willing to take a stand when the rights of children are in danger – be it the right to survival, the right to food, the right to family, the right to cultural and religious identity or the right to education.

When I learned about the theme of the 2019 Week of Spirituality, I was humbled to notice that it directly resonates with this conviction that I hold dearly...a call to safe guard human dignity.

## **Second, is the innate desire to accompany those who need help most – the VULNERABLE**

When we launched the Moral Imperative, we affirmed that the moral test of our society is how the weakest and most vulnerable are faring. I hold this view dearly and to this end we have strived to be champions of the underprivileged and the marginalized. I believe that this is the commitment enshrined in the 2030 Agenda as: “leaving no one behind.” A pledge that holds great promise for promoting and for advancing the rights, perspectives and well-being of the vulnerable.

And so, children born in poverty, or exposed to violence and conflicts, need protection the most. It’s up to us to protect them from harm. We must help them escape from poverty, protect them against violence, safeguard their rights and their safety. When we launched the Moral Imperative, we affirmed that the moral test of our society is how the weakest and most vulnerable are faring. I hold this view dearly and to this end we have strived to be champions of the underprivileged and the marginalized. I believe that this is the commitment enshrined in the 2030 Agenda as: “leaving no one behind.” A pledge that holds great promise for promoting and for advancing the rights, perspectives and well-being of the vulnerable.

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## **Third, I draw hope from my belief that there are proven and effective SOLUTIONS**

I have been a student and practitioner of sociology, theology, peacebuilding and leadership development. In this journey, I have come to believe that poverty, exploitation and violence are not inevitable. Ladies and Gentlemen, the problems that children face across the world, are man-made. We therefore

must challenge unjust structures, false priorities, gross inequalities and distorted values that perpetuate the suffering of the children of the world. To quote the Moral Imperative statement. “Our sacred texts...call us to combat injustice and uplift the poorest in our midst. No one, regardless of sex, age, race, or belief, should be denied experiencing the fullness of life.”

In short, our engagement in creating a better world for all children is aimed at saving their lives, alleviating their suffering and maintaining their sacred human dignity.

Now this is a task that may appear daunting... but this noble award that I have received today, reminds me of the inspiring words of a wise woman who once told me Fred...you may not change the whole world...but you can change the whole world for one child at a time and I dare add...one generation at a time.

**Thank You, Ladies and Gentlemen and  
God Bless You all.**