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# Rose Mlale Mwadime (1938-2013): Championing Mothers' Union Ministry in the Anglican Church of Kenya, Dioceses of Nairobi and Mombasa

By Evans Mwangi

Rose Mlale Mwadime (1938-2013) had a transformative impact on the Mothers' Union in the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) Dioceses of Nairobi and Mombasa through her visionary leadership and unwavering enthusiasm. She championed women's economic empowerment, fostered unity among women in the church, and served as a catalyst for social change.

## Early Life and Family

Rose was born on October 3, 1938, the firstborn in a family of eight siblings, six boys and two girls. She was raised in a moderately well-off household; her paternal grandfather owned a large livestock ranch. Rose began her education at a local primary school before progressing to Murray Intermediate Girls' School, the most prestigious school in Taita-Taveta at the time. She later joined a local teachers' training college. Upon completing her training, she began her teaching career at Mkwachunyi Primary School. Those who knew her during this time describe her as a firm, hardworking, loving, and caring teacher. Rose integrated academics, social ethics, and Christian discipleship in her teaching.<sup>106</sup>

Rose was known for riding a bicycle from home to school, an unusual sight in her village at the time. In those days, it was rare to see a woman riding a bicycle in Taita, despite the considerable distance between Rose's home and the school where she taught. Public transportation was virtually nonexistent in that part of Taita, as was the case in many regions of Kenya at the time. As she cycled through the villages, Rose often endured curious stares, ridicule, and harsh criticism from the villagers. Her mother, Mary Saru, became the subject of mockery as many believed she had made a foolish choice by sending her daughters to school, leaving no one to help with farm work. Mary allowing Rose and her other daughter to train and become teachers was considered a great embarrassment, and some even saw it as foolish for her to consent to their education.<sup>107</sup>

Later, Rose married Jefferson Willy Mwadime. In the early years of their marriage, Jefferson was admitted to St. Paul's Theological College in Limuru, Kenya, where he trained as a full-time priest to serve in the ACK. Upon completing his ministerial training, he was posted to ACK All Saints Parish in Mbale, Taita-Taveta,

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<sup>106</sup> Bryson Samboja, interview by author, February 10, 2024, Kwale, email correspondence.

<sup>107</sup> Elias Kombo, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Taita-Taveta, phone conversation, and Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

within the Diocese of Mombasa. This appointment marked the beginning of Rose's active involvement in Mothers' Union work.<sup>108</sup>

## **Christian Missions and the Rise of Rose as an African Woman Leader**

In East Africa, women responded to the arrival of European missionaries in diverse ways. Some African girls received education from European women attached to the overseas missions, while others were denied such opportunities. In many cases, young women were married off early by their parents to prevent them from attending school, even if they desired an education. Missionary women, on their part, employed the language of spirituality to frame and humanize their engagement with the African landscape, offering a distinct response to the environment.

Missionaries believed that African women should be trained to create proper Christian homes for their husbands, who were expected to be more educated than women. Like their European counterparts, African women were seen as primarily responsible for managing the household. Some African women served as church leaders. For example, William Jones held a leadership role at Rabai Mpya, a mission station established by early missionaries about 15 kilometers from Mombasa City. The establishment of churches and mission centers in the interior of East Africa by Africans from Bombay, who were employed and compensated by missionaries, significantly contributed to the spread of Christianity among African women.

Overall, African women actively responded to the arrival of European missionaries by pursuing education, serving as church leaders, and significantly contributing to the establishment of churches and mission centers throughout the interior of East Africa, even after the countries gained independence. Rose was one of the few women who, supported by her parents, seized the opportunity to become a devoted Christian and pursue her education despite discouragement from her peers. Rose later became a prominent advocate for women and families within the ACK Dioceses of Nairobi and Mombasa. Her lifelong dedication to the Mothers' Union had a profound impact on the communities she served, establishing her as a respected leader and a champion of social change.

In mid-1965, Rose and her husband had the opportunity to travel to England for a year of further training in Christian ministry. During this time, Rose acquired valuable insights and developed strong organizational skills, particularly in family and women's ministry. This experience greatly equipped her for the work she would undertake with the Mothers' Union in later years, enabling her to serve with confidence and effectiveness.<sup>109</sup>

Rose experienced firsthand the struggles and challenges faced by women and families in her Taita community. Moved by a deep sense of empathy and justice, she

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<sup>108</sup> Elias Kombo, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Taita-Taveta, phone conversation

<sup>109</sup> Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

began a journey to address these issues, one that eventually led her to the work of the Mothers' Union later in life. With unwavering dedication, she committed herself to uplifting the lives of other women, exemplifying compassion, service, and solidarity.

## **Rose's Organizational Skills**

Rose's exceptional organizational skills, which greatly contributed to her efforts to bring about positive transformation within the Mothers' Union in both the ACK Diocese of Nairobi and the Diocese of Mombasa, were largely shaped by a year-long training program she underwent in England. Rose had a remarkable talent for organization. She skillfully planned and coordinated various activities aimed at supporting women and families. Whether it was organizing workshops to teach new skills or sourcing funds for women in need, Rose consistently found practical ways to make things happen. Her ability to collaborate with others further strengthened her impact and effectiveness.<sup>110</sup>

While in England, Rose had the opportunity to interact with women from other parts of Africa as well as from other developing countries. She also spent considerable time socializing and engaging with English women. According to Rose's youngest daughter:

The training in England enabled my mother to acquire a multicultural viewpoint on life, which enlarged her thinking and reasoning capacity. Among the areas she was trained in were home-nursing, food & nutrition, first-aid, etiquette, Christian ministry, and how to conduct Bible Study, among other areas. These skills and others helped her to transform mothers who became better in their general and church life. My mother was a good role model to women in the church and to us, too, as her daughters.<sup>111</sup>

Rose was highly competent in addressing women's issues with effectiveness and insight. She related easily with people of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and levels of education. Her work in the two dioceses clearly demonstrated that she was well-equipped and dedicated to the mission of the Mothers' Union.<sup>112</sup>

## **Rose's Spiritual Insights**

Rose gave her life to Christ at a very early age and later led her parents and grandparents to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This earned her deep respect from her family and marked the beginning of her Christian ministry. She later became a prominent leader in the Mothers' Union.<sup>113</sup> Rose's faith in God was central to her life.

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<sup>110</sup> Anglican Church of Kenya Diocese of Nairobi: MU, File No: 1- 1959-1979.

<sup>111</sup> Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

<sup>112</sup> Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

<sup>113</sup> Elias Kombo, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Taita-Taveta, phone conversation.

Jesus was her guiding priority, influencing everything she did. She believed that supporting women was a powerful expression of love and kindness, reflecting the teachings of her faith. Regularly praying and reflecting, she sought ways to impact women's lives positively. Her faith gave her strength and courage to persevere, even in the face of difficult and seemingly impossible challenges.<sup>114</sup>

Rose organized Mothers' Union prayer groups, encouraging women to pray alongside their other activities within the dioceses she served as a Mothers' Union leader. To deepen the faith of women in rural areas, she also established Bible study groups for them. This initiative helped the women grow in their Christian faith and values, leading to a positive transformation in their lives. Rose was truly a transformative leader in her Mothers' Union ministry.

## **Rose's Transformational Impact on the Mothers' Union Ministry in the Anglican Church of Kenya Dioceses of Nairobi and Mombasa**

Rose's impact on the Mothers' Union in the ACK Dioceses of Nairobi and Mombasa was truly transformative. Through her visionary leadership and tireless advocacy, she championed initiatives that tackled critical issues such as gender inequality, poverty, healthcare access, and education.

### **Rose's Mothers' Union Ministry in Taita, Mombasa Diocese**

Leaving her family in the care of relatives, Rose traversed the hills, valleys, and plains of Taita, seeking out women to teach and evangelize, equipping them to fulfill the objectives of the worldwide Mothers' Union, which are: To uphold the sanctity of marriage as a lifelong relationship; To awaken in all mothers a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls; To organise in every place a band of mothers who will unite in prayer and seek by their own example to lead their families in purity and holiness in life.

Rose organized annual prayer and teaching gatherings for women across both the lower and upper Coast during those early years, aiming for their complete transformation. She firmly believed that the church's role was to transform the community, and that this could be achieved most effectively by empowering women holistically. Through her guidance, women learned to pool their limited resources and gradually build self-reliance, fostering holistic growth in their lives.<sup>115</sup>

### **Rose's Mothers' Union Ministry in Nairobi Diocese**

In December 1970, Rev. Jefferson Mwadime, Rose's husband, was appointed to serve at ACK St. John's, Pumwani, in the Diocese of Nairobi. Consequently, Rose and their

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<sup>114</sup> Bryson Samboja, interview by author, February 10, 2024, Kwale, email correspondence.

<sup>115</sup> Elias Kombo, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Taita-Taveta, phone conversation.

children relocated to Nairobi, where she continued to champion Mothers' Union work with unwavering dedication. Bishop Kombo, one of her former students, remarked on her transition to the ACK Diocese of Nairobi:

For Rose to have moved to Nairobi, this was the beginning of a new era in an urban set-up. Having trained in England, the transition wasn't much of a challenge except a change in the language of communication from kidawida and Kiswahili in her home area Taita to communicating in Kiswahili & English in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. It was quite a shift in lifestyle, but Rose took this change in stride and became a darling of the ladies at St. John's Pumwani, Nairobi, later.<sup>116</sup>

At ACK St John's Parish, Rose served as the chairperson of the Mothers' Union department. She worked closely with women from diverse backgrounds, including those from wealthy, middle-class, and poor families. St John's Parish bordered the Majengo Slums in Nairobi, home to many low-income residents, while nearby Pumwani and Eastleigh are predominantly middle-class neighborhoods. The parish also serves other areas in Eastlands, which are largely lower- and middle-income residential communities. Beyond the parish boundaries, Rose's Mothers' Union work extended to Bahati, Ziwani, Landimawe, Shauri Moyo, and Muthurwa.<sup>117</sup>

One of Rose's most significant contributions was the creation of community-based support networks for mothers and families facing adversity. These networks offered practical help alongside emotional and spiritual support, nurturing solidarity and resilience within marginalized communities such as Majengo.

During this period, Nairobi was segregated into residential areas based on race, with designated neighborhoods for Africans, Asians, and whites. The Majengo slums, predominantly inhabited by poor Africans, faced numerous challenges affecting women, including alcoholism, prostitution, and thuggery. Domestic violence, unstable relationships, and polygamy were common realities. Rose worked tirelessly to transform the lives of these women, beginning by building close, trusting relationships despite their difficult lifestyles. She then taught them how to establish small businesses to generate income for survival. Rose was particularly close to one woman from Majengo, so much so that she named her last-born daughter after her, Naomi Chepkoech.<sup>118</sup>

Rose also served as the Mothers' Union Coordinator for the Diocese of Nairobi. In this role, she oversaw a wide geographical area that included Nairobi, Machakos, Kithangathini, Syongila, Ukia, Kitui, Kajiado, Loitokitok, and Isinya. Within Nairobi, the parishes under her care included All Saints' Cathedral, St. John's Pumwani, St. Barnabas, St. Stephen's, and Jericho. Rose empowered the Mothers' Union women to engage in various income-generating activities, such as jumble sales, fundraising events,

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<sup>116</sup> Elias Kombo, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Taita-Taveta, phone conversation.

<sup>117</sup> Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

<sup>118</sup> Sera Nzano, interview by author, March 10, 2024, Nairobi, phone conversation.

and the production of handcraft items. She guided them on how to market and sell these products within their respective parishes. The proceeds were used to support the needy in their communities, while twenty percent of the funds raised was retained to support other Mothers' Union initiatives.<sup>119</sup>

Rose consistently reminded Mothers' Union members of their responsibility to ensure that their parish church buildings were well maintained and beautiful, both inside and out. She emphasized the importance of placing fresh flowers on the altars and taught that keeping altar vestments clean and in good condition was part of their sacred duty. Under her influence, the mothers not only bought new church furniture but also took the initiative to repair what could be restored.<sup>120</sup>

To foster fellowship, Rose encouraged mothers to organize tea parties and invite their husbands, neighbors, and members of other denominations beyond the ACK. Under her leadership, Mothers' Union members actively participated in church planting and the construction of worship sanctuaries. They also served as ushers during Sunday services and taught Sunday school. Additionally, the Mothers' Union ladies took the initiative to provide guidance and counsel to youth groups within their parishes.<sup>121</sup>

## **Mothers' Union Ministry in Mombasa**

In January 1976, the Rev. Jefferson Mwadime was appointed the first African Provost of the ACK Mombasa Memorial Cathedral. His wife, Rose, along with their children, accompanied him back to the Coast of Kenya, this time to the Lower Coast. Rose resigned from her Mothers' Union position in the ACK Diocese of Nairobi. Upon settling in Mombasa, she became the chairlady of the Mothers' Union at ACK Mombasa Memorial Cathedral. One of the first projects she undertook at the Cathedral was the transformation of a nursery school that had been initiated by the then Bishop's wife, Mariamu Mwang'ombe.

Rose, a well-trained teacher with additional relevant experience, played a key role in firmly establishing the project. To inspire confidence among other mothers, she enrolled her own daughter in the Cathedral's nursery school. This act encouraged the rest of the mothers to follow suit, leading to increased enrollment. Under Rose's firm supervision, along with her professional and spiritual guidance, the school experienced rapid growth. It soon gained a reputation for excellence, attracting other parishes within the Diocese who came to the Cathedral nursery school for benchmarking.<sup>122</sup>

Apart from her involvement with the school, Rose played a key role in uniting all the mothers at the Cathedral in Mombasa, fostering a strong sense of mutual support among them. She also held regular meetings with the youth and members of the Cathedral choir to address the challenges they faced both in their personal development

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<sup>119</sup> Anglican Church of Kenya Diocese of Nairobi: MU, File No:3- 1974- 1979.

<sup>120</sup> Anglican Church of Kenya Diocese of Nairobi: MU, File No:2- 1970.

<sup>121</sup> Anglican Church of Kenya Diocese of Nairobi: MU, File No:3- 1974- 1979.

<sup>122</sup> William Nzano, interview by author, March 16, 2024, Mombasa, email correspondence.

and in their service through music ministry. Later, Rose was elected as the Provincial Mothers' Union treasurer.<sup>123</sup> Her official service in the Mothers' Union concluded in 1994 when her husband, the Very Reverend Canon Jefferson Willy Mwadime, retired from active church ministry and returned to his rural home in Taita.

Rose died in 2013, leaving behind a legacy of compassion, courage, and service. Though her physical presence is no more, her spirit lives on in the countless lives she touched and the lasting impact of her work. Rose's legacy stands as a powerful testament to the transformative difference one individual can make through faith, perseverance, and an unwavering commitment to social justice.

## **Rose's Rich Legacy**

Rose Mlale Mwadime dedicated her life to making a meaningful impact on mothers within the church. Beginning with modest efforts, she emerged as a remarkable organizer, strengthening the work of the Mothers' Union in two key church regions. Guided by a deep faith in God and an unwavering work ethic, she transformed the lives of many women. Under her leadership, the Mothers' Union grew in influence and became a greater support to families. Rose's legacy reminds us that with faith and determination, we can bring lasting change to our communities.

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<sup>123</sup> Charity Kinyeki, interview by author, Mombasa, March 15, 2024, phone conversation.

This biography, submitted in July 2024, was researched and written by Rev. Dr. Evans Mwangi (PhD, Religious Studies, ANCCI University, Amarillo, Texas, USA), a full-time priest serving at ACK St. Joseph of Nazareth, Aldina, in the Diocese of Mombasa. He also serves as a part-time lecturer at Mount Kenya University and Bishop Hannington Institute in Mombasa. This biography was originally presented during the 2024 Kenya Christian Biographies Conference, held at ACK Mombasa Memorial Cathedral April 23-24, 2024 under the original title of “Rose Mlale Mwadime (1938-2013): A Champion of Mothers Union Work in ACK Dioceses of Taita-Taveta, Nairobi, and Mombasa.”