

# SELFINA

Victoria Kisyombe

My reflection on the partnership between the ELCT Eastern and Coastal Diocese (ECD) and the Northern Great Lakes Synod (NGLS) is based on my work in the economic empowerment of women, my involvement in Church work, as well as my personal experience living in Tanzania.

I am the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Sero Lease and Finance Limited (SELFINA) whose aim is to empower women economically through lease finance. We started our work in Tanzania in the late 90's but our organization was formally incorporated in 2002.

In 2013 the company benefitted from a USD 5,000 donation from Women of the NGLS following a visit to SELFINA's head office and meeting some of the beneficiaries. The team was led by Luanne Skrenes. We all fondly refer to her as *Mama Askofu*, the Bishop's wife.

That donation served as a crucial springboard to leapfrog the company to the next level as more women were now able to access credit and SELFINA was able, in turn, to leverage the revolving funds and attract an overdraft from a local bank. The rest, as they say, is history.



*Victoria Kisyombe (with a head wrap in the middle) flanked by Luanne Skrenes (left) wife of Bishop Skrenes of ELCA, Women of ELCA and women of SELFINA outside SELFINA's office 2004*

Since then more than 27,000 women have accessed our lease facilities worth US\$ 17 million. The scheme has created more than 150,000 jobs and impacted both directly and indirectly an estimated 250,000 lives in Tanzania. Women lease equipment like small tractors, corn milling machines, rice polishing machines, sunflower and palm oil pressing machines, irrigation equipment, solar energy generation machines, etc.

Our work has attracted recognition and accolades from the World Bank (2007) and the World Economic Forum (2010). Vital Voices founded by Hon. Hillary Clinton (2014) and many other national and international stakeholders ([www.selfina.com](http://www.selfina.com)). It is with deep gratitude, therefore, that I look at the partnership between the NGLS and the ELCT ECD as one of the key drivers of SELFINA's success.



*At personal level, I have enjoyed the privilege of being friends with Bishop Thomas Skrenes and his wife Luanne. I do not take for granted the rare opportunity I have had to be hosted and driven around by the Bishop!*

I look in awe at the commitment and love shown to me and the ELCT-ECD by Bishop Skrenes, his wife Luanne and other members of NGLS. Luanne has tirelessly organized volunteer teams of dentists to offer pro-bono services to the people of Tanzania through our Diocese.

*Victoria Kisyombe (second right) during a visit to a partner Church in Iron Mountain, Michigan.*

Equally important for me has been getting the opportunity to become friends and appreciate the love of Pastor Steve Cowen and his wife Cindy. In a rare twist of events, during one of their partnership visits to Kijitonyama

(where I worship and have had the privilege to lead the Elders' Council for over a decade) Pastor Steve baptized and also, he and his wife became godparents of my grandson Moses.

David and Mary Lou Blomquist, John and Joan Lillie, the Late Bruce and Jan Collins represent some of the many families that I have come to know and respect through this partnership. Top on the list of people I truly admire is an amazing woman I have come to call friend and member of my family, Nancy Buchcusi. Nancy and her family call my home their home in Africa. I call her home my home in America. Nancy truly loves Tanzania and her people, especially her Kijitonyama family.

This is all thanks to the enduring partnership between the ELCT-ECD and NLGS.

I have fond memories of some brave youths from NGLS who have left their big footprints at our Kisarawe Lutheran Junior Seminary in the outskirts of Dar es Salaam where they participated at different times in construction activities at the school. These youths volunteered to come to Africa and to the ELCT-ECD, leaving behind the comforts of their homes in the USA. They travelled thousands of kilometers to an unknown world to offer their support.



*Kijitonyama Evangelical Choir from Tanzania visiting the Northern Great Lakes Synod of the ELCA in Michigan.*

One of them, Loni LePage from Our Savior's Lutheran Church, stayed at my house during the weekends. Since then, I have become her mother in Africa and remain connected with her and her family in the US.

Through the years we have been blessed with bilateral exchange visits between the NGLS and the ELCT-ECD. Our two churches share a common love for the Lord. We worship and praise the Lord together, do some projects

together and enjoy the Lord's creations together in our respective countries. My own Parish, Kijitonyama, has played a leading role in these bi-annual exchange visits with Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Iron Mountain. One such visit also stands out. Ten years ago, Bishop Skrenes, through Bishop Malasusa, invited the ELCT-ECD Kijitonyama Evangelical Choir (*Kwaya ya Uinjilisti Kijitonyama*) to visit the NGLS and grace the NGLS General Conference with their presence. The choir performed several concerts at different churches within the NGLS. One hit prayer song that touched the hearts of many within the NGLS was *Sema na moyo wangu* (*Speak to my heart*). HE did, thanks in large part, to this partnership. I remember "Feed my Sheep!" was the theme of a powerful sermon preached by Bishop Thomas Skrenes during the consecration of Alex Malasusa as bishop of the ELCT-ECD at the Azania Front Cathedral. What a fitting message to a young pastor then being sent by the Lord to herd His ECD flock! I feel like it was only yesterday.



*Bishop Dr. Alex Gehaz Malasusa, Head of the Eastern and Coastal Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)*

Over the years, one of the Church Elders of Kijitonyama, Dr. Hans Macha and his wife Violet, have hosted the Skreneses at their home. Kijitonyama Parish feels greatly honored that Bishop Malasusa has entrusted us with this special task to host the Bishop's family. Equally memorable is the fact that the Kijitonyama Elders' Council has welcomed and hosted Bishop Skrenes, Luanne, their sons as well as the Dental team, Teams from Our Savior's Lutheran Church, and many other visitors from the NGLS.

Finally, as the epitome of my reflection, I will never forget May 2015 when I was so greatly honored and deeply humbled to address the NGLS Synod as a Keynote Speaker representing my Bishop Dr. Alex Malasusa of our ELCT-ECD. Bishop Dr. Alex Malasusa is the Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation for Africa. At that time, he was also the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. He had some pressing prior commitments in Dar and decided that I deputize him as a special envoy.

All honor and glory to the Lord for that undeserved opportunity, which only goes to demonstrate the depth and breadth of this partnership, which has steadily grown and has been lovingly cultivated over the years by our two churches.



*Victoria Kisyombe receiving a prestigious Award of Economic Empowerment of Women by Hon. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Former Secretary of State and Presidential Candidate, which is given annually through Vital Voices Global Partnership at the Kennedy Center, Washington D.C. on June 17, 2014.*