

“Transforming the Mindset for Societal Change”

Speech Delivered by:

His Excellency Joseph Nyuma Boakai, Sr.

President of the Republic of Liberia

at the

Commencement Convocation of the United Methodist University

Doemah Town Campus, Margibi County, Liberia

January 30, 2024

Dr. Yar Donlah Gonway-Gono, President, United Methodist University

Esteemed Board Members,

Faculty and Staff,

Proud parents,

Members of the Press,

Our Proud Graduates,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we gather to celebrate the remarkable achievements of nearly 1,200 outstanding young people, I join our happy parents, guardians, and family members on this joyous occasion, to first say, “*your thank you plenty*” and well done. We are here not only to celebrate you but to celebrate you. Congratulations!

I cannot but reflect on my graduation several years ago. And it is even more than gratifying that I can do so at this Institution—United Methodist University - an institution that evolved out of my Alma Mata and a school I helped to found.

I also extend heartfelt greetings to the President of the United Methodist University, Dr. Yar Donlah Gonway-Gono, for extending this gracious invitation to me. Your unwavering commitment to academic excellence and your exceptional leadership have taken this institution to new heights. Congratulations to you, and the University’s esteemed Board.

Today adds to what has been a growing relationship with not only the United Methodist University (UMU) and its hard working and innovative president but also a historical connection to this educational facility that also houses my Alma Mata the College of West Africa (CWA). It is this bond that keeps bringing me back, even now as President of Liberia.

I cannot but mention a few historic coincidences with this university. It may interest you to know that my first commencement address following my election as vice president to President Sirleaf- also an alumnus of CWA - was to graduates of UMU. Today, just a week after being sworn in as President, I am again at the United Methodist University to give my first commencement address, this time to the 19th graduation class of UMU.

Coincidentally also, the president of this university, Dr. Yar Donlah Gonway-Gono, who was then the only female president of a degree-granting institution invited me to be her first graduation speaker at the Nimba Community College in 2015. I am here again responding to her invitation to speak to this year's graduating class of the university she heads. I would like to thank Dr. Gonway-Gono for the years of friendship and collaboration in academia.

My strong bond with UMU is also reflected in my scholarship to three students of this university who have and continue to demonstrate not only high academic excellence but also good moral behavior. The three students under my sponsorship at this university have demonstrated nothing less.

In the context of the unlimited possibilities available to you when you set goals and diligently pursue them, it is my pleasure to inform you that a former university student has gone on to achieve so much for herself and made her country proud. Ms. Hellen Momoh, whom I have proudly helped to sponsor, has managed to resist the challenges of lack - as some of you have faced while in school -to go on to graduate from some of America's prestigious schools such as Harvard University and Georgetown University, obtaining degrees in mathematics at Georgetown. Hellen is now pursuing her master's degree program at Harvard in Statistics and Data Management

My Dear Graduates,

My dear graduates, I would like to speak to you briefly about a topic very dear to my heart, one of a mindset shift that is critical to the way we view our country, society, and each other: "Transforming the Mindset for Societal change." A change that first starts with us individually before permeating the society.

We must always remember that our mindset informs our behavior, which in turn shapes our society, and to build a better society, it is important that we begin holding conversations that will lead to a positive mindset shift now. It should not be about harmful individualism that leads to greed and corruption but about societal change for the common good. Regrettably, Liberians spend more time bringing each other down and missing the opportunity to upgrade themselves.

We are aware that years of war and violence have had a social impact on our country, but we must also acknowledge that we have had many years of peace, stability, and opportunities to reshape society, in ways that should allow us to frown on behaviors that eat the very fabric of society.

The growing decline in good moral standards is of great concern to me, and it is becoming increasingly evident that until we address bad public behavior in society, generations will come to believe norms that are inimical to society.

The lack of respect and love for each other is demonstrated daily in many ways across society in the way we think and talk and use media channels including the radio to tear each other apart for greed and selfish reasons.

Citizens, it seems now, are prepared to undermine each other, and lie to protect their jobs, even if it is detrimental to the public good.

It is disheartening that very few people now subscribe to values and principles. These vices are becoming pervasive in society with young people feeding on them as the new normal.

We must start challenging these predominant norms that have overtaken our society and negatively impact behavior. We need a mindset shift to break the recurring challenges of underdevelopment in our country; we must see things differently, treat others with mutual respect, and view service from a more compassionate lens than individualism and greed, which fuels the scourge of corruption so prevalent in our country. On this note, I would like to quote Pope Francis who poignantly said:

“Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself, and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is ... Life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.”

Change comes when we develop the mindset to break from the past and free ourselves of such notions, undermining progress. The change we must seek should challenge these societal vices and their agency. A transformed mindset that opens up the space and grants everyone equal opportunity builds the foundation for an equal and compassionate society.

The key to this transformation is education, which is why as graduates and students who have been taught to think, you must challenge the current mindset and question norms that are contrary to love, a compassionate spirit, integrity, honesty, and peaceful coexistence. Your degrees should not just be about the knowledge you have acquired, but how well you are going to use it to impact the conversation and bring about collective change.

It is important to tune down the rhetoric and hold meaningful dialogues about the questions of society and how we should deal with each other across the divide. Peaceful conversations enable divergent perspectives on what confronts us as a country and how we can together address them. The false messages on Facebook are not helpful to future generations.

My friends, the road to a new mindset is not walking alone; it is a journey that should involve us all, and taking a cue from a wise African proverb, “If we want to go farther on this road, we should walk together.”

Always remember the power to change society is with you - the way you think and behave will shift the mindset in the direction of truth, accountability, integrity, fairness, and transparency. I, therefore, challenge all of us to begin thinking of a new mindset that will transform our country and become the promise it was meant to be by the founding fathers. Let us live by the golden rule to do to others as we would have them do unto us.

My dear graduates, today marks more than just academic accomplishments. It's the beginning of a journey filled with boundless opportunities.

I pray that you view this moment as only the start of a journey of profound journey of great opportunities.

Many of you will likely pursue careers in the public sector to contribute to your country's development. However, in this age of boundless opportunities, the private sector is emerging as a dynamic force for economic growth and innovation. I urge you not only to consider joining this sector but also to become pioneers in its expansion.

Imagine yourselves as entrepreneurs who shape industries and redefine business landscapes. I encourage you to also pursue studies in information technology, as this area is the new frontier, we will be exploring to advance the country's development. We will provide opportunities that will help you exploit your talents and be your own employer.

Knowing the transformative potential of your skills and aspirations can serve as a driving force to push you forward. Your journey does not just involve choosing a career path; it plays a role in shaping the economic future of our country. It would be advantageous for both you and the country to explore different fields, including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and the agriculture value chain, which is full of potential. It is an area waiting to be fully explored to create wealth for our people.

By immersing yourselves in the agriculture value chain, and engineering you become pioneers and trailblazers, pushing open the doors to a vibrant job market.

It's crucial that you don't rest on your laurels. Build your capacity to embrace challenges, seize opportunities, and let your passion light up a path toward a future where your impact goes beyond personal success and leads to transformative change in the world. Today's achievement should not merely be one of higher education, but tools to help you navigate the complexities of this changing globalized world.

I urge you to ensure that your pursuit of excellence is not just for yourself but for the benefit of society. As today's graduates, the knowledge you have gained should not be confined to academia but inspire others. For those pursuing further studies, consider your role not only as scholars but also as agents of change who can challenge existing paradigms and drive transformative progress.

Distinguished Guests, Well Wishers, Fellow Liberians, both at home and abroad,

As we embark on this new journey, we solemnly pledge to restore not only our state institutions but also the integrity and prestige of our great nation. The task ahead is monumental, but with our youth having the right perspective and a new mindset, we are confident that Liberia will rise from the ashes stronger and more prosperous.

In our commitment to transparency and accountability, we want to re-echo our pledge to commission a comprehensive audit of the stewardship of the previous Government.

We want to clarify that this audit is not meant to be a witch hunt. Rather, it is a necessary step towards understanding the extent of the challenges we face and ensuring that those responsible for any wrongdoing are held accountable.

Moreover, we acknowledge the seriousness of the economic challenges facing our nation, and we are determined to implement measures that promote fiscal responsibility.

Most importantly, we want to send a clear message to our public officials: misusing public resources will not go unpunished. Graduates, I want you to know that corruption impedes the development of any country and steals the future of generations unborn.

As we move forward, we humbly request your unwavering support, understanding, and active participation in rebuilding our nation. The road to recovery may seem daunting, but together, we will overcome and build a Liberia that stands as a beacon of integrity, progress, and prosperity. Let us work hard towards a brighter future for all.

Let us never shun our resolve to always **THINK LIBERIA, LOVE LIBERIA** so that together we can **BUILD LIBERIA**.

May God Bless us All and Save our Cherished State.