# Vice-Chancellor's Installation Speech

*Prof. Esther Mombo*

THE BATON IS IN OUR HANDS: CARRYING 123 YEARS OF LEGACY INTO A FUTURE OF IMPACT

INSTALLATION SPEECH BY PROF. ESTHER MOMBO

VICE-CHANCELLOR, ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

17TH SEPETEMBER 2026

The University Chancellor Hon. Prof. Margaret Kobia, EGH,

The St. Paul's University Council Chairman, His Grace the Most Rev. Dr. Jackson Ole Sapit,

The Guest Speaker, Prof. Mary Getui,

The Former Vice Chancellor of St. Paul's University, the Rt. Revd. Canon . Prof. Joseph Galgalo,

Members of the Board of Trustee and the University Council,

The Vice Chancellors and their Representatives from Partner Universities Present,

The University Board of Management and the Senate,

Faculty, Administrative Staff, Students and Alumni of St. Paul's University,

My family present and those who are away

Distinguished Scholars and Guests,

Standing before you today as the Fourth Vice Chancellor of St. Paul's University is an honour that words can scarcely capture. This moment is deeply personal for me. For over twenty years, I have walked the corridors of this great institution. I have served as academic Dean, the first Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, where I oversaw our monumental expansion and the opening of our campuses and later as the Director of International Partnerships and Alumni Relations among other distinct roles at the university.

I have witnessed our growth, shared our challenges, and celebrated our triumphs. My journey is proof of St. Paul's commitment to nurturing leadership from within. I am profoundly grateful for the trust the Trustees and the Council have placed in me to lead St. Paul's University

I am particularly moved today by the presence of our Guest Speaker, Prof. Mary Getui. Professor, achievement in academics is not just inspiring; it is a testament to the heights we can achieve. I want to acknowledge your words of encouragement and inspiration this morning as a friend and a cherished mentor in the academic profession. Your work over the years has helped shape my own scholarly and leadership path, and having you here today makes

this installation complete. I also wish to thank my sister and friend (a sister in crime) The Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, she is the reason I came to St. Paul's and stayed to this time. Working in WCC she was supportive of SPU in growing people and contributing to its infracstrucutre. Both Prof Mary Getui and The Rev. Nyambura Njoroge represents a continental sisterhood called the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who are rejoicing with me this day.

Today is a day of Thanksgiving, but it is also a day of responsibility. I thank God for the faithfulness that has brought St. Paul's University through 123 years of history; for the generations who have carried this institution through different seasons; for those who planted seeds whose shade they themselves would never enjoy; and for everyone who has contributed to making St. Paul's University what it is today.

To be entrusted with the leadership of this institution at this particular moment is both a privilege and a sacred responsibility. At a Christian university, leadership is not merely an administrative position. It is stewardship. It is service. It is an invitation to hold together scholarship and faith, excellence and compassion, institutional growth and public responsibility. I therefore stand before you with humility because I understand the weight of this responsibility. I do not receive St. Paul's University as a possession; I receive it as a trust—a trust from God, a trust from those who came before us, a trust from the University community, and a trust from the generations of students who will come after us.

## THE BATON IS IN OUR HANDS TO STABILISE THE FLIGHT

As I reflect on this moment, I am reminded of the two images that of a baton in a relay race and a flight. In a relay, no runner begins the race alone. Each runner receives a baton from someone who has run before them, carries it faithfully for a particular stretch of the journey, and then, at the appropriate time, passes it on to another runner. The baton does not belong to the individual runner. It represents a responsibility that is larger than any one person. It is received, carried and eventually handed over. Today, the baton is in our hands.

After 123 years of St. Paul's University, we stand at one of those defining moments in the race. We have received a remarkable inheritance from those who ran before us. They taught, sacrificed, prayed, built, served, led and kept the vision alive. They carried the institution through uncertainty and opportunity, through seasons of growth and seasons of challenge. We now have the responsibility not simply to hold the baton, but to run our part of the race with courage, wisdom and faithfulness, and to ensure that when the time comes to pass it on, we leave St. Paul's stronger, more relevant, more excellent and more impactful than we found it.

But there is another image that helps me understand where we are today: the image of an aircraft in flight. (in popular SPU language is has been branded as boeng 1903). The relay race reminds us that we have inherited a baton; the aircraft reminds us that we have somewhere to go. We are not holding this baton so that we can stand still and admire what previous generations accomplished. We are carrying it forward. And St. Paul's University is already airborne. Generations before us provided the vision, courage, sacrifice and commitment that brought this institution to where it is today. They helped us take off. Our responsibility now is to stabilize the flight, maintain a clear direction, navigate the turbulence of our times, and ensure that the aircraft reaches a destination worthy of the legacy we have inherited.

Every successful flight requires a clear destination, a capable crew, balanced systems and the capacity to respond when conditions change. In much the same way, the next chapter of St. Paul's University will require clarity of purpose, strong leadership, committed faculty and staff, engaged students, responsible stewardship of resources, and the courage to navigate the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world. The purpose of stabilization is not to remain airborne indefinitely; it is to sustain the journey toward the destination. We must therefore consolidate the gains of the past while preparing the University for the future. The baton therefore becomes more than an image for this installation. It is a call to stewardship. It reminds us to honour the past without being imprisoned by it, to understand the present without becoming comfortable with it, and to embrace the future without fear. The aircraft reminds us that this stewardship must be active: we must keep moving, keep discerning, keep adjusting and keep our eyes on the destination. The 123 years behind us are not merely a story to celebrate; they are a foundation upon which we must build. The question before us is not simply, What has St. Paul's University been? The deeper question is, What must St. Paul's University become?

And perhaps that is the challenge of this moment: to carry the baton while flying the aircraft. We honour what has been entrusted to us while having the courage to take it somewhere new. We are to preserve the values and achievements that have brought us this far while being willing to innovate, adapt and respond to the needs of our generation. We must run faithfully, but we must also fly wisely. The baton gives us our heritage; the flight gives us our horizon. Together, they remind us that we are custodians of a past, stewards of a present and builders of a future.

## WHO IS ESTHER MOMBO?

At this point, I would also like to pause and acknowledge the person at the center of today's installation. Who is Esther Mombo? Born of Mombo Maikuri and Maria Vulimu, I was raised by my grandmother Enisi Mugesia a quaker woman who was the first in her village to join the mission center .

She was my first theological educator, supporting me to do theology when everyone at home I had lost my mind. She gave me skills to survive in theological education which she described as a place of jackets, her description of Patriarchy.

Prof Esther Mombo is , first and foremost, a woman of faith whose life has been deeply intertwined with Christian education, theological scholarship, leadership and service. She is a scholar, theologian, teacher, mentor and administrator who has spent many years investing in people and institutions. Her journey has been marked by a commitment to theological education that speaks to the realities of African communities, to scholarship that engages the questions of our time, and to the formation of people who can serve the Church and society with integrity. But Prof. Esther Mombo is more than the titles attached to her name. She is a person who understands that education is ultimately about people and transformation. She has walked with students, scholars, churches, communities and institutions; listened to difficult questions; encouraged emerging scholars; participated in important conversations about the Church and society; and contributed to the growth of theological education in Africa and beyond. Her leadership has been shaped not simply by a desire to occupy positions, but by a commitment to create spaces where others can grow, contribute and flourish.

It is therefore significant that she assumes the responsibility of Vice-Chancellor at this moment in the life of St. Paul's University. She does not come as a stranger to the University's mission, but as someone who understands the world of Christian higher education and the particular responsibility of a university that stands at the intersection of faith, scholarship, Church and society. Her installation comes as St. Paul's reflects on 123 years of its journey and looks toward the years ahead. The baton has been passed, and with it comes the responsibility to discern wisely, lead courageously and build collaboratively.

Yet this baton does not belong to Esther Mombo alone. It belongs to all of us. The Vice-Chancellor may carry the baton at the front of the University's leadership, but the race belongs to the entire SPU community.

The Council carries it. Senate carries it. Management carries it. Faculty and staff carry it. Students carry it. Alumni carry it. The founding Churches carry it. Our partners carry it. Each generation must decide what it will do with the inheritance it has received.

## 123 YEARS: GRATITUDE, LEGACY AND RESPONSIBILITY

St. Paul's University is not a young institution searching for an identity. We are an institution with a remarkable history and a deep Christian heritage. Our story is rooted in the commitment to theological education and ministerial formation, but over the decades St. Paul's has evolved and expanded into a comprehensive university offering education across theology, humanities, social sciences, business, communication, technology and other fields. Our journey demonstrates that St. Paul's has never been static. We have adapted, expanded, responded to changing realities, embraced new disciplines, strengthened our academic programs, developed postgraduate and doctoral education, expanded partnerships, invested in research and innovation, and increasingly engaged with technology and the changing needs of society.

As we mark 123 years, therefore, we are not simply celebrating longevity. We are celebrating a legacy of faith, education, service and transformation. Yet an anniversary of this significance must also compel us to ask difficult and necessary questions. What have we learned from our journey? What must we preserve? What must we change? What must we strengthen? And, most importantly, what kind of university will the next generation inherit from us?

We honour those who came before us not simply by repeating what they did, but by having the courage to do in our generation what they did in theirs: to respond faithfully to the needs of their time. The pioneers of St. Paul's responded to the educational, theological and spiritual needs of their generation. Our generation must respond to the challenges of ours.

## MICAH 6:8: OUR COMPASS FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER

It is deeply significant that, at this particular moment in the life of St. Paul's University, our annual theme is drawn from Micah 6:8:

"God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

These words are more than a beautiful biblical quotation. They provide us with a theological compass for our institutional journey. They challenge us to ask not simply what we can achieve, but what God requires of us as a university.

OUR PRIORITIES FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD First, we must be a university of academic excellence. We must strengthen teaching and learning, attract and retain excellent scholars, invest in faculty development, strengthen postgraduate and doctoral education, encourage interdisciplinary scholarship and create an environment where students are taught not simply what to think, but how to think. Our Christian identity must give us confidence to engage difficult questions with honesty, integrity and courage.

Second, we must strengthen research and innovation that serves society. Knowledge must move from the library to the community, from the journal to public policy and from theory to transformation. We must ask what problems communities face, what questions churches are confronting, what young people are struggling with and what Africa needs to understand about itself. Our research should not simply tell society what we know; it should help society understand what must be done.

Third, we must embrace the digital and artificial intelligence revolution responsibly. AI is changing education, research, communication, employment and knowledge production. We must understand it, teach it, research it and engage its ethical implications. We must ask not only what technology can do, but what it should do. Innovation at St. Paul's must always be guided by conscience, human dignity, justice and the common good.

Fourth, we must keep the student at the center. Buildings do not come to SPU to learn. Strategic plans do not graduate. Technology does not need mentorship. Students do. They arrive carrying dreams, expectations, anxieties and enormous potential. Our responsibility is to help them become the best versions of themselves. I want every student who passes through St. Paul's to leave with more than a degree—with knowledge, character, faith, confidence, competence and a sense of responsibility to society.

Fifth, we must recognize that our staff are the people who carry the mission. Investing in them, creating opportunities for professional development, recognizing excellence, strengthening teamwork, improving Communication and nurture a culture of trust and accountability. The university we desire cannot be built by one office or one group. It will be built by all of us. Sixth, we must remain faithful to our Christian heritage while open to the world. Our Christian identity should make us more committed to serving society, not more inward-looking. We must strengthen our relationships with our founding Churches and ecumenical partners while also building bridges with government, industry, civil society, international institutions, universities, research networks, alumni and communities. SPU must continue to be a bridge between faith and scholarship, between Church and society, and between Africa and the world.

Finally, we must move from being simply a university of choice to a university of impact. People should choose SPU because of the quality of our education, the character of our graduates, the relevance of our research, our commitment to innovation, our Christian values and our culture of service. But ultimately, we should be known for

impact: graduates who transform institutions, research that informs public life, innovations that solve problems, scholarships that speaks to contemporary realities, and a university whose presence makes communities better.

## THE BATON WE WILL PASS ON

Friends, St. Paul's University has travelled a long road. There were pioneers who dreamed. There were leaders who sacrificed. There were faculty who taught. There were administrators who served. There were students who believed. There were Churches that supported. There were partners who invested. There were alumni who carried the name of SPU into the world. Through all these generations, God has sustained us.

Now the baton is in our hands. We must carry it faithfully.We must run our part of the race courageously. And when our time comes, we must pass it on.

As I assume this office, I make no promise that the journey will be easy. There will be difficult decisions, competing priorities, disagreements, constraints and moments of disappointment. But I make this commitment: I will listen. I will learn. I will consult. I will seek wisdom. I will defend the mission of this University. I will pursue excellence. I will advocate for our students. I will support our staff. I will strengthen our partnerships. I will encourage innovation. And I will seek to lead with integrity. Above all, I will strive to remember that I am a steward, not an owner. The office I occupy today will eventually belong to another person. The decisions I make today will affect people I may never meet. Therefore, I must lead not only for the present generation, but for those who will come after us.

## CONCLUSION: A NEW CHAPTER

At 123 years, St. Paul's University does not stand at the end of its story. We stand at the beginning of another chapter.

Our history is behind us. Our responsibility is before us. Our future is waiting for us. The baton is in our hands. The journey continues.

Let us therefore move forward with courage, faith, excellence and humility. Let us honour our past without being imprisoned by it; understand our present without being limited by it; and look toward the future with confidence because we know that our deepest calling is to serve God and humanity.

And when future generations look back at this moment, may they say: This was the generation that honoured the past, confronted the present and courageously built the future. This was the generation that acted justly, loved mercy and walked humbly with God. This was the generation that faithfully carried the baton and handed it forward with greater strength, greater wisdom and greater hope.

May God bless St. Paul's University. May God bless our students and staff. May God bless our founding Churches and partners. May God bless the generations that have gone before us and the generations yet to come. And may God grant us the wisdom, courage, humility and strength to faithfully steward the next chapter of this great institution.

The baton is in our hands.

Let us carry it well.

To God be the glory.

Amen.