

Uganda's Miracle

Amid war and persecution, Christians are experiencing a revival in Uganda that is marked by church growth, an unprecedented drop in AIDS prevalence and a changing political landscape.

Sometime in 2003, two elderly women gave their lives to Jesus in the villages of northern Uganda. They were the mothers of Alice Lakwena, the now exiled "prophetess" who founded the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and her successor, Joseph Kony, the International Criminal Court (ICC) fugitive whose campaign has led to the deaths of thousands, including children.

Though quiet, the events signify a dramatic shift that has been occurring across the war-torn region since intercessors led a rather unusual "military" operation they dubbed Operation Gideon: The Healing of the Land.

"The president [Yoweri Museveni] turned to the church when it became evident that the army was getting nowhere with the war," the Rev. John Mulinde, director of the Kampala-based World Trumpet Mission, told Charisma. "Brig. Gen. [David] Wakalo, a man of God and the army's chaplain, had seen a vision in which the Lord said the war would not end through force of arms alone, but through prayer."

President Museveni, the man credited with turning the country around from decades of bloodshed and socioeconomic upheaval, ordered that a new offensive be mounted with the Christians leading the charge. The churches and various prayer ministries asked three area pastors—Julius Oyet, James Magara and Mike Kimuli—to pray, renouncing witchcraft and idolatry at the high places where Kony performed satanic rituals once a year.

After several weeks of fasting and prayer, Mulinde says, the team gathered at the high place, where there were seven major altars and seven smaller ones, the biggest and most notorious being in the Awere Hills of Gulu. When the intercessors approached this particular altar, the soldiers stood back, fearing its reputation. The altar had a well so bitter and poisonous that a leaf would turn dry moments after falling into it.

The intercessors anointed the place with oil and prayed until they believed the demonic powers had been broken. The prayer leaders then tasted the water. It was sweet. The soldiers were so amazed they gave their lives to Jesus on the spot.

Kony's grip has been weakening ever since. Today he is on the run in the jungles of the Congo, the Sudanese government has opened its southern border to Ugandan anti-Kony operations, and thousands of rebels have surrendered or been killed. Some 17,000 children who had been kidnapped to fight for the LRA have been rescued, and Kony's chief witches have surrendered to Jesus.

Upon his capture, Kony's top aid, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Banya, quoted the rebel leader as saying: "The spirits have left me, and it is all the fault of those Christians." Museveni, too, credits Christians for the army's progress. Oyet says the president told him: "What you have done in one weekend we couldn't do in months."

Transforming a Nation

Ministry leaders say the turn of the 20-year war in the north

is just one sign of the growing influence Christians are having in Uganda. Since the 1970s, when dictator Idi Amin murdered thousands in an attempt to convert the nation to Islam, Christianity has been spreading in the East African nation.

Church growth, miraculous signs, and protracted prayer and fasting have marked the largely southern movement known as the Biwembe ("Papyrus") Revival, named for the papyrus structures that once served as churches.

Today sanctuaries are among the finest buildings in the nation, routinely hosting congregations of more than 10,000. Researchers estimate that at least one-fifth of Uganda's 26 million residents are born-again, and they represent the single largest political constituency in the country. For more than a decade, politicians have been turning to the church not only for votes but also for help in bringing social change.

In early 1991, the late Balaki Kirya, then President Museveni's minister of state security, summoned area pastors and announced that the government was turning over the AIDS disaster to the church. Studies indicated that 30 percent of the population would be dead by 2000 and another 30 percent infected. Only 30 percent, comprising children and the elderly, would remain, likely leading to economic collapse.

At that time the church, particularly a veteran of the Amin persecution named Peterson Sozi, already had begun working to stop the spread of the epidemic. "We undertook extensive research on the disease and then launched a countrywide campaign of information," Sozi says. "This was a deliberately interdenominational effort."

Sozi, a Reformed Presbyterian pastor who now mostly does the work of an evangelist through his Back to God Evangelistic Association, used every pulpit available to “demystify” the disease. “Every Sunday before preaching, a message calling for abstinence would be preached,” he says. “We would then hammer the message home through parents, grandparents, teachers and any other authorities we could reach. Prevalence numbers began to fall.” Today AIDS prevalence among adults is at roughly 5 percent.

By the time the world took notice—Uganda’s success in bringing down prevalence is unrivaled anywhere—a simple message based on abstinence had contained a runaway killer.

The abstinence message in Uganda has been so successful that Johns Hopkins University’s Population Services International—known for facilitating the importation of condoms to combat AIDS in Africa—now offers other demographic services, an incensed Kenyan secular journalist operating in Kampala told Charisma, blaming the influence of first lady Janet Museveni, who is born-again.

But as in the days of the “Butcher of Uganda”—Amin killed between 300,000 and 500,000—the church has used the opportunity offered by adversity to show the power of the gospel.

Fally Kuteesa, who is on the pastoral team of Christian Life Church in Kampala, has used every opportunity to tell about her healing from HIV and AIDS. She would not relent in her pursuit of healing until the day when she saw in a vision: GD Fally Kuteesa: Negative, negative, negative. “I did not know what GD might be, but I knew what negative meant,” she says. The next day, her 20th HIV test proved negative.

In the mid-1990s, dozens reported that they were healed of AIDS during crusades led by apostle Deo Balabyekubo, who turned the country upside down over a live wire period of 12 months before his sudden death in May 1995.

Balabyekubo called his church to three 40-day fasts before receiving confirmation that they were to lead healing crusades to address the AIDS crisis. Within a span of six months, roughly 1 million people attended the meetings held in the heart of Kampala. By the time the government stopped the crusades because of the ever-swelling crowds, the ministry had 103 documented cases of healing from HIV and AIDS.

After Balabyekubo died in a car accident while rushing to a rally he was to host for American evangelist Ernest Angley in the city of Jinja, Grivas Musisi, who served as bishop under Balabyekubo, took the reigns of the ministry. He led another crusade, where 300 hundred people were healed of AIDS and their cases verified by doctors.

The ministry later helped pioneer home care for AIDS patients. Musisi says too many people were seeking healing at the church and quite a few were dying. "There was one week when 15 died on us," says Musisi, now senior pastor of the Prayer Palace Christian Centre in Kampala. "We realized that God heals, but also that He may choose not to heal."

Musisi started a Lazarus Department, which cares for AIDS patients at home and operates a school for AIDS orphans.

Preaching a Gospel of Miracles

Today many ministries are caring for AIDS patients. Back to God runs a school for the AIDS orphans of the Kivulu slum in Kampala. The Africa Ssesse Mission Initiative, which operates in the 50 or so inhabited islands of the western Lake Victoria, is using a system where Christians take in and care for four AIDS patients at any given time, according to its pastor, James Kasujja. There are also personal efforts such as that of John Mayombwe, an HIV sufferer who himself takes care of AIDS patients, offering counseling and access to hospital care with donor aid.

AIDS healings are only some of the miracles that have helped elevate the church during the Biwembe Revival, which is the latest in a series of renewal movements that began with the East African Revival in the late 1940s. "A million miracles have been witnessed here," Musisi says. And the man he calls "the father of us all," Simeon Kayiwa, has been in the thick of it all.

"It was Balabyekubo who pioneered the protracted fast. Sozi made the gospel the source of practical answers. Kayiwa is more of a pastor who raised many leaders," Mulinde says.

Indeed all the homegrown churches, born from the furnace of the political and religious persecution of the Amin years, seemed to be linked to at least one of these men. Kayiwa, the founder and for 15 years head of the National Fellowship of Born Again Churches of Uganda, is estimated to be the father of almost 90 percent of the country's 35,000 Pentecostal churches. The success of the church in Uganda is the result of the "miracle gospel," observers say, and Kayiwa has come to personify this.

"[In 1977], the ... year Amin murdered [Anglican church] head

Janan Luwum in a bid to destroy Christianity, Jesus woke me up to wake up others into what continues to run today," Kayiwa told Charisma.

Only in his 20s at the time and an avowed atheist, Kayiwa says God told him: "Go and bring My people back to Me. Tell them I am the greatest power in all heaven and Earth. Tell them to leave witchcraft and come back to Me. I will be with you wherever you go, to perform miracles and wonders, by which people will know that I have sent you."

The church, oppressed and outnumbered as it was, would not believe this student of philosophy, trained at the prestigious Makerere University. Kayiwa says Sozi took him in and mentored him. "I was a young believer and he was the only person at that time who was prominent in the faith," Kayiwa says. "He gave me guidelines, and I respect him very much."

Sozi's band of not-so-underground worshipers who met in the Kibowa forest, near Kampala, was traveling the land, preaching the gospel, healing the sick and generally upsetting Amin's Saudi-funded mission to convert Ugandans to Islam by bribery or sword. Sozi had achieved such notoriety that only miracle after miracle kept him alive. Still, Kayiwa was joining the ranks of a depleted army.

With Amin busy pillaging the country, many took refuge at Kayiwa's little papyrus sanctuary on Namirembe Hill. The illegal church became the home of countless New Testament-style miracles and the subject of a little volume the pastor wrote, titled *Working Miracles*, published by the United Kingdom's New Wine Press in 2003.

The media, including the BBC and the U.K.'s Daily Mail newspaper, came knocking, trying to make sense especially of healing miracles that defied the cynicism of Kampala's secularist doctors. Kayiwa was to record up to 18 programs touching on healing with the BBC.

Kayiwa says he has seen 11 people raised from the dead and reports that 1,000 churches have been birthed from a single miracle. But the ministry came under fire in 2003 when Kayiwa was accused of practicing witchcraft. Miracles magazine editor Rochelle Gibler alleged that Kayiwa made human sacrifices, had the spiritual power to meet with devils in the Bermuda Triangle, took part in the Sept. 11 attacks alongside Osama bin Laden, stole money from her accounts and was a homosexual.

Because of Kayiwa's prominence, the government set up a commission to investigate the charges but found no evidence to support Gibler's claims. The affair left a bad taste in the mouths of Christians, but it failed to divide them. "He is a good man. He is the father of us all, a very wonderful man," Musisi says. "[Gibler's accusation] is rubbish. That is why he overcame the woman. She could not prove any of it."

Changing the Political Landscape

Today church leaders have their sights set on transforming Uganda's social, political and economic landscape. Mulinde, whose ministry seeks "to concentrate God's power in social transformation," remembers a 90-minute prophecy given in 1995 that promised the Ugandan church would have an effective worldwide outreach. The prophecy also revealed the place of nations in God's purposes.

“A prophecy came to us that if we continued to pray for problems to go away, there would be more to pray for,” Mulinde says. “But if we prayed for God’s purposes to stand and for the nation to come into its destiny, that would solve our problems.”

From this prophecy the Mulinde-led National Prayer and Fasting Campaign was born. The main focus of this movement, aimed at “praying into place God’s principles of nation-building,” has been the AfriCamp, a massive prayer rally held annually and usually attended by the president.

As a result, all of Uganda joins in prayer and fasting at the beginning of every year, meeting in public places around the country and standing against the dark forces arrayed against the nation. In 2000, the people and the president, who was flanked by his entire cabinet, made a covenant with God to renounce idolatry and witchcraft. The president handed over the national flag to the assembled ministers, symbolically turning the nation over to God.

One of the promises that came with the prophecy was that if the church sought God, He would open doors for them everywhere—in Parliament, in the State House, in intellectual circles and among captains of industry. The results are now evident.

Thirty-nine-year-old pastor Jackson Senyonga—whose Christian Life Church in Kampala is Uganda’s largest sanctuary of any denomination or creed—says there are prayer networks in almost all public offices. The president has appointed the first charismatic army chaplain and has effectively turned the economy over to the “Balokole”—the born-again ones—naming several finance ministers and central bank governors from

among their ranks.

"We love the born-again because they have their own police in their hearts," Senyonga quoted Museveni as saying.

The president went so far as to ask Christians to volunteer for public service. "The president says that only the principled can make a difference," Senyonga told Charisma. "He would say, 'If [born-again Christians] don't have skills I will give them the skills. But I want the heart.'"

"The president closely associates with born-again churches," says Kayiwa, who has a personal relationship with the president. "But for political reasons, he does not state clearly whether he is born-again."

Kayiwa says the fact that the president has packed the top echelons of government with Christians is evidence of where his heart is. Senyonga notes that Museveni named a "fervent" Christian to the office of government prosecutor and appointed a Minister of Ethics and Integrity.

Yet challenges still lie ahead. Although the 20-year conflict in the north has improved, according to British International Development Secretary Hilary Benn, it has created a humanitarian crisis. Nearly 1.5 million people are living in displacement camps, and thousands of children make nightly commutes from their villages to sleep under verandas in cities because they fear abduction by the LRA.

Kony is notorious for forcing children to commit atrocities for the LRA, including cutting off victims' ears, noses and lips.

In April, more than 58,000 Americans spent the night outdoors to draw attention to Uganda's "night commuters." Birthed from a documentary titled Invisible Children, which chronicles the plight of a generation raised amid war, the campaign is calling on the U.S. to help end the conflict. Bobby Bailey, 24, one of the film's three creators, says that because the number of abductions is declining, the real problem now is the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

Mulinde says ministries in the south are partnering with churches in the north to assist with evangelism in displacement camps, train Christian leaders and help people reintegrate into society. But observers say the needs and ministry opportunities are enormous.

"I would love to see some of these megachurches in this country see what their churches could do in these IDP camps," U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback told Charisma. "They need help rebuilding their lives."

"It is a classic case of the harvest being plenteous and the laborers being few," says George Otis Jr., president of The Sentinel Group, which has documented Uganda's spiritual renewal in its popular Transformations video series. "We've been trying to ... mobilize churches to send teams over there, in some cases joining with teams from churches in southern Uganda, to get in there before the Muslims move in and start establishing schools and businesses."

Rebuilding the north will likely take years, but Ugandan ministers are optimistic about their nation's future. This month Senyonga will begin holding worship services in the 150,000-capacity Mandela National Stadium, which he expects to one day fill. He believes God has used the nation's trials to

usher it into its destiny.

“Thank God for Idi Amin,” Senyonga says. “I don’t think Amin was godly, but I think God utilized the atrocities he committed to introduce Uganda to a spirit of desperation. We suffered so much, and Satan pressed us so far out, we ended up in the hands of God.”

Kyalo Nguku is a journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya. He traveled to Uganda in January to file this report.

Healing the Wounds of War

Christians are helping the people of northern Uganda recover from a 20-year conflict.

The burden of war has fallen on small shoulders in northern Uganda. Since 1986, an estimated 30,000 children have been abducted and forced to fight in the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by self-proclaimed prophet Joseph Kony.

“They used us kids to kill kids,” says 10-year-old James, who escaped the LRA three months after he was kidnapped. “When new kids would come they made us kill them with machetes or big sticks.”

Now living in an orphanage in Nimule, located on the border of Uganda and Sudan, James is one of thousands of former child soldiers seeking to heal from the trauma of war and to adjust to life outside the LRA.

More than 15,000 former soldiers have found refuge at World Vision's Children of War Rehabilitation Center in Gulu. In addition to offering education and healthcare services, World Vision staff address spiritual needs. When a child enters the program, "all of the staff get together and lay hands on the child," says World Vision program manager Jackson Omona. "We pray and cast out the demons that the child has picked up in the bush."

Although abductions have become less common in recent months, children who live in vulnerable areas make a nightly exodus to safe zones such as the Noah's Ark and Doctors Without Borders compounds in Gulu. After visiting northern Uganda in 2003 and witnessing the phenomenon of the night commutes, three 20-something Christians created a film titled Invisible Children, which documents their plight.

The documentary has since spawned a humanitarian organization that is sending 300 Ugandan children to school and employs 200 people living in displacement camps. "It's so easy to get overwhelmed when there's so much war," says Invisible Children co-creator Bobby Bailey. "But to that one [we can help], it makes a huge difference. To those 300 kids, it's life-changing."

All the residents of Canaan Family Farm (CFF), located in the Masindi region of the north, are displaced from their homes and have been abducted or threatened by the LRA. CFF reaches out to them through evangelism, healthcare and income-generating initiatives. "We came to Canaan as refugees," says Michael Nyeko, who lives on the farm with his two sons. "When we settled here we gave all of our problems to God."

Canaan lends land to families, enabling them to support

themselves through farming. Members participate in weekly Bible studies, children's activities and worship services held at the ministry's Grace Community Church, which meets under a canopy of trees.

Christian workers say the gospel is bringing hope in the midst of suffering. Says pastor Richard Angoma, co-founder of CFF: "In the presence of so much darkness, death and despair, the light and hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ brings restoration."

Blake Farrington