

When a Smile Is Supernatural

The first thing I noticed about my Ugandan friend Nelson Barigye was his smile. When Nelson greets you, it's as if he switches on a 60-watt light bulb. His smile is so bright that during a visit to England a few years ago, a woman told him: "You smile like God."

But when I learned more about his difficult situation, I wondered if I could smile at all if I were in his shoes. Why is this guy so happy?

At age 40, Nelson and his wife, Grace, have five sons—ages 15, 13, 11, 8 and 6—and all seven of them live in a tiny, two-bedroom apartment in the city of Masindi, three hours from Uganda's capital. The five boys sleep in one room. Their bathroom is shared with three other families who have seven other children.

The kitchen is outside. Grace uses a *sigiri*, a charcoal stove, to cook meals. The apartment costs 100,000 Ugandan shillings a month—\$30 U.S.—but Nelson struggles to pay the rent because he also must pay school fees of \$130 per term.

Nelson and his family live on a basic diet. Breakfast consists of sliced plantains, chapati (Indian-style flatbread) and tea. ("The boys get milk maybe twice a week," he says.) Lunch is usually *matooke*—mashed plantains—and *offals*, which are boiled cow intestines.

Dinner may include sweet potatoes and beans, but Nelson has to be careful what he eats because of a recent flare-up of ulcers that sent him to the doctor. He had to pay \$30 U.S. for treatment—the equivalent of a month's rent.

To complicate matters, Nelson's youngest son, Godwill, has a disability and couldn't walk until recently.

For a long time Nelson's family didn't have their own means of transportation, except for his used motorcycle. But last year his pastor, Robert Kaahwa, allowed him to purchase his 1991 Toyota Sprinter at a greatly reduced price. Nelson's bright smile lit up again when he told me how proud he was of that vehicle.

He smiled again while sharing that he and his wife are thinking about adopting a daughter because there are so many abandoned babies in Uganda.

I couldn't help but marvel at this guy's joy. I tried to imagine sharing a toilet and bath with 18 people every day. I thought about how uncomfortable I'd be in that hot apartment with a tin roof and no electric fan. I wondered if I could stand to eat *offals*.

"My hope is in my God," Nelson told me when I asked for the secret of his smile. "Jesus is my Lord whether I am hungry or not. I am a living example that there is hope in God and His generosity. No one can add anything to their life by worrying, so I have learned to trust in God."

Nelson grew up in a home with nine children. His grandfather was a witch doctor, and his father was a nominal Anglican who beat his wife and children mercilessly. But his dad stopped beating his mother after a dramatic conversion.

"My father believed he should dominate everyone, especially women," Nelson explained. "But after he got saved he changed dramatically."

Nelson found Christ at age 23. And that's when he also found his trademark smile. Jesus flooded his soul with miraculous joy.

Today Nelson spends most of his time working for C3 Church, a growing Pentecostal congregation in Masindi. He plays the keyboard during worship, leads the praise team, disciples

young people and serves Pastor Kaahwa. In return he gets a small stipend—all the church can afford since the majority of members don't have steady jobs.

Like many Ugandan churches, only fifteen percent of the congregation has salaries. At C3 Church, which has 800 members, the weekly collection is only \$20. Or \$30 on a good Sunday.

During the offering time at church, some people who don't have money give other things—such as fruits from their gardens or bags of cassava flour. “Once someone gave a chicken, all tied up,” says Nelson. “They just laid it on the altar.”

These offerings of food sometimes end up on Nelson's family table, and he is grateful for the provision.

Nelson's joy in the face of unimaginable lack totally rocked my world, especially after considering that I pay more for a dinner with my wife at an American restaurant than Nelson spends on meals for his family in a month.

I asked Pastor Kaahwa how he explains Nelson's joy. “People in my church know that having the Lord is the most important thing in life,” he said. “There are a few people in Masindi who have money yet they are not happy. When they find the Lord, immediately the joy of the Lord becomes evident.”

If you have the joy of the Lord, I hope you realize how priceless it is. And I hope you can let your joy shine as brightly as my Ugandan brother, Nelson—who smiles in the face of poverty and rejoices instead of complaining.{eoa}