

The Radical New Look of African Anglicanism

St. Kakumba Chapel in Uganda has grown from 500 to 5,000 members since Pastor Medad Birungi replaced stale traditions with Pentecostal vibrancy.

Pastor Medad Birungi was the least likely man to engineer a spiritual rebirth in the tradition-bound Church of Uganda. Raised in a polygamous home (his alcoholic father had six wives and 32 children), Birungi suffered horrible trauma, rejection and poverty. But he had a dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit while he was a college student, and his moment of renewal is still having ripple effects throughout Uganda and the world.

Birungi was a religious Anglican before this experience. He despised Pentecostals and viewed them as sheep-stealers and misguided pretenders. But while he was performing with a choir on a conference stage near Kampala in 1987, he felt strangely compelled to run outside to pray. He was then literally arrested by the power of God. He fell to the ground and spoke in tongues for three hours.

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Says Birungi: “I was crying out to God, ‘I accept! I accept!’ My Anglican tradition said miracles no longer happened. But my new experience broke all my biases.” The next day he had a lengthy vision of a blinding light and sensed a strong call into ministry.

That same year an Anglican bishop who was dying of leukemia

laid hands on Birungi and gave him an important message. "He told me that if people are sleeping in a house that is on fire, you must wake up the people in that house," Birungi says. "You don't leave the house. He begged me not to leave the Anglican Church, but rather to bring renewal to it."

Birungi, who is 47, has been engaged in this work of renewal ever since. But opposition has been intense. Some Anglican leaders have sharply criticized him, accusing him of "joining the Pentecostals." But it's difficult to argue with the success he has witnessed, especially since he assumed the pastorate at St. Kakumba Chapel in Kampala in 2002.

In those seven years the 50-year-old church has grown from 500 to 5,000, and a recent study by the archbishop's office determined that Kakumba is the fastest-growing Anglican church in Uganda. (It is built on the exact site where a Christian boy was martyred in the late 1800s.) When I asked Birungi how his church grew so fast he listed several radical departures from old traditions.

First of all, Birungi eliminated liturgical formalism. Ministers at Kakumba quit wearing robes a few years ago. Liturgical furniture was removed and communion is now served monthly instead of weekly. "We decided to remove any liturgy that seemed irrelevant," Birungi says. But the congregation still recites the Apostles' Creed. The rafters of the cavernous building seem to shake when people make their bold declaration of faith.

Secondly, a contemporary worship style was adopted. Kakumba's lively praise team includes a keyboard, drums, guitars and more than 10 singers, and it is not unusual for them to break out in African-style dancing. The organ and piano were retired to a storage room. "We have great freedom in worship but we still blend contemporary choruses with some of the old hymns," the pastor says.

Thirdly, services are longer. Typical Anglican churches in Africa gather for only an hour. But Birungi says it takes at least two hours to devote enough time for worship, teaching and personal altar ministry. Most of Kakumba's members attend one of three Sunday morning services, and a Swahili-language service is offered later in the afternoon.

Fourthly, Birungi dramatically altered his denomination's view of baptism. Anglicans have historically baptized infants, but Birungi installed a baptismal tank in the church in 2006 and offers baptism by immersion for adults now. Babies are dedicated to the Lord but not baptized.

Finally, a radically new ministry philosophy has been adopted. Only three categories of ministers are ordained in the Anglican tradition: priests, deacons and bishops. But Birungi's matra is "every member a minister." He has empowered an army of volunteers to lead cell groups, Alpha courses, inner healing classes, Navigators Bible studies, evangelism training classes, weekly outreaches to the community and summer mission trips to England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Birungi is also radical in his outspoken advocacy of women ministers—because he believes releasing women from traditional restrictions is a key to world evangelism.

Even though the global Anglican communion is in turmoil because of liberalism and a shrinking membership, Birungi says he feels called to stay in his denomination and work for renewal. He is especially encouraged that the Archbishop of Uganda, Henry Luke Orombi, is a charismatic who has taken the lead in opposing the acceptance of homosexuality in the church.

"Personally I feel called to revive the Anglican Church, so I cannot leave it," Birungi told me. "I want people to know that miracles still exist. The church is not dead."

From what I witnessed at St. Kakumba Chapel this past weekend, Anglicanism is very much alive and well in Uganda. If Birungi's Pentecostal fervor spreads, I won't be surprised to see an army of African missionaries heading in our direction.

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