

VOICES OF LAMENT & FAITH FROM THE FRONT LINES OF MISSION

Glimpses from the Duke Center for Reconciliation Journey to Uganda

Last week we returned from ten glorious days in Uganda—myself, co-director Emmanuel Katongole, board chair Nancy Rich, and PhD student John Kiess. And with Emmanuel at the wheel, quickly moving into “Uganda driving mode” darting cows, pedestrians, carbon monoxide, and “boda-boda” motor bikes, believe me, we depended on your prayers.

Just outside Kampala, from November 15 to 17, at a beautiful, restful setting overlooking expansive Lake Victoria bursting with the tilapia we ate every day, forty Christian leaders from the African “Great Lakes” geography of Congo, southern Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi met at our invitation.**



Catholics, Baptists, and Anglicans to Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and Mennonites, all encountering unimaginable suffering, they released themselves of titles, worshipped with joy and tears, engaged Scripture, and talked deeply about the challenge facing Christian witness in the region. As red-hatted Catholic Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala of Uganda said in his opening remarks, “Very rarely do you see such an ecumenical gathering, all committed to deepen the roots of a Christian vision of reconciliation.” Many expressed that something special was birthed.

“This is a gathering, not a conference,” we told them. They embraced that vision: from archbishops to grassroots practitioners, from

Listen to voices from the journey. Their great suffering and their great faith is not for them alone.

“We need able mediators and negotiators, who bring warring parties to the table ... However, we also need leaders who are able to translate the biblical visions reconciliation to the community and congregational level so that the search for peace does not simply become the work of ‘experts’ but the desire and mission of everyone”

From opening remarks by Cardinal Wamala of Uganda

“I came to this gathering because of the focus on peacebuilding through the Christian perspective. There are so many trainings, but this is unique”

Jimmy Juma Mulunda of the African Peacebuilding Institute, over dinner the first night

“Trauma ... Traumatized ... Trauma healing ...”

The word was repeated in so many ways over three days, a strange new language. The stories of those who came made it concrete.

“They tried to kill me. My neighbor was among them (Josephine from Rwanda)... I lost seven family members (Daniel from Sudan) ... My wife was killed and my daughter was raped (Ochola from Uganda) ... The elders of the church roasted her husband over a fire and made her eat the flesh. She came to me for help. When I returned, they had killed and buried her too (Mbala from Congo) ... I was reduced to nothingness (Pie from Burundi) ...”

Glimpses of stories we heard the first day, turning the meeting room into holy ground. Pie told of confirming 100 parishioners in the morning, being ambushed by rebels in the afternoon, escaping up a mango tree the entire night, seeing snakes creep up beside him, and feeling the text of his confirmation sermon, “For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God”

“The church was there when all this was happening. Where is the church to which God entrusted the ministry of reconciliation? Where is *that* church?”

Emmanuel Kolini, Anglican Archbishop of Rwanda

“When you ask the question, how do we deal with the deaths—of killing *by the Christians*—these are very profound experiences, beyond human imagination, and the church does not have the witness to give the world, because we are part of the brokenness around us... But God has not abandoned us. God is always there”

Maclearod Ochola of northern Uganda

“How do we connect these stories to scripture: ‘God was reconciling the world to himself’? ... How do you answer this horror? ... Is the church a sign of hope or is it part of the problem? ... What do you do with this thing called ‘tribe’? Is it a blessing, or curse? ... How do you deal with the past? Forgive and move on? How do you remember in an ongoing way? ... Many of the Psalms are Psalms of lament—where are you God? Come on, show yourself ... These are some of the crucial questions for us to engage”

Emmanuel Katongole of Duke Divinity School, leading the group into a deep time of theological reflection on the stories

“We have to forgive to gain the life of our country back ... Christians must become a cooling system for all this pain”

Bishop Daniel Deng of Sudan

“The crying need of the church today is leadership”

Peter Tibi of the Sudan Council of Churches. Bishop Ochola of Uganda framed the need in the context of an unforgettable story ...

“98% of the world’s people are like the elephant... 1% are like the hare ... 1% are like the tortoise ...”

Bishop Ochola, summing up his colorful tale of elephants guarding precious water; of the wily hare, scheming to deceive and coming in disguise, sending the elephant running away in fear; of the brave, easily underestimated tortoise offering to guard the water, keenly aware of the hare’s schemes, snapping at hare as it approached in disguise. Like the elephant, said Ochola, most of the world is fearful; whatever the hare says, the elephant will run. A very small number are like the hare; they know everything but use their intelligence to manipulate the people. Those like the tortoise are also very small in number; they also know the truth of how things work, yet use the truth for good, to resist the deceivers. The question before the group became, how do leaders like the tortoise become possible? How does the church form such leaders?

“I have experienced rejection ... loneliness ... disappointment ...”

A Rwandan leader, naming marks of leaders willing to speak the truth in societies wracked by injustice and a church that is often silent or complicit

“If it is possible... live at peace with everyone... leave room for God, for it is written, revenge is mine... If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty give him something to drink, in doing this you will heap burning coals on his head’ (Romans 12:8). This is one of my favorite passages. When something horrible happens, it’s how you react that is crucial. Leave vengeance to God; give your enemy water and food.”

Bishop Daniel. Earlier in the morning I had heard his story of 7 family members being killed in the violence in Sudan

“[the quiet sounds of various names of people being whispered around our circle, often in choked-up voices...]”

Prayers of Remembering uttered during the final worship service, as people were invited to call out the names of loved ones, neighbors, and martyrs who lost their lives in conflicts. Afterwards we sang “This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long,” reminding me that Psalms of lament and Psalms of praise are always walking hand in hand

**“We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
Ministers, not messiahs,
We are prophets of a future not our own”**

Praying in one voice at the end of the gathering, reciting the words of Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was killed for his witness of hope

“Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory”

Closing song, bishops, practitioners, and young pastors alike clapping, rejoicing, waving hands in the air, the words more a prayer than I’ve ever felt them before

“I have benefited more from this conference than the entire semester at the university’s peace studies program”

James Odong of World Vision Uganda

“I want to express my gratitude: this was a life changing experience. I had never worshipped with someone from Sudan, and here there is a Sudanese. Here there have been Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics and Pentecostals, all worshipping. If reconciliation happens, they will say it started here. I am going back to the Congo with a new story to tell ... Please, bring us together again.”

United Methodist Bishop Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda, chancellor of African University in Zimbabwe, who spoke of the wars between the countries of the Christians at the gathering, of how the old stories about Idi Amin had haunted him, of never coming to Uganda before and being terrified when he arrived at the airport. He ended up extending his stay for two more days.

ADVENTURES OF LIFE IN UGANDA

“Just how significant is that 2% difference?”

Me commenting to Emmanuel while watching chimpanzees fighting for food, punishing perpetrators, screaming in protest, and caring for their young, during a visit to Jane Goodall’s island of rescued chimps in Lake Victoria. We were told that chimps and humans shared 98% of their genes

“Now *that’s* a radio combination you never hear in the U.S.”

Breaking into laughter with Emmanuel, John, Nancy, and our new friend Ian Cron at a restaurant as Kenny Roger’s “Know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em” from “The Gambler” was followed immediately by “Great is Thy Faithfulness”

“Would you rather have a dead Mukungu [white man] in the morning? Or give him another room?”

Emmanuel to hotel staff person, who was insisting on not giving John another room even after his lake-fly infested room in Jinja on Lake Victoria was fumigated with a nauseating

insecticide. Later we celebrated our final night in Uganda sharing a huge, whole Talapia fish, head and all, fresh and beautifully prepared. And John got a new room.

Chris to Emmanuel: “I almost lost my kneecaps.” Emmanuel to Chris: “Believe me, I don’t even drive in that part of the city!”

After our perilous “Boda-boda” rides carried by two motor scooter drivers-for-hire through the bustling streets of Kampala, holding for dear life as they swerved within millimeters of passing cars, carts, bicycles, and pedestrians. Our search for soccer shirts for my two sons ended successfully

“Things I see standing here that I don’t see standing in America: email is a distraction ... where my son gets into college isn’t important ... losing power once a day, hard rain that might make a road impassable, the difficulty of communicating with home—they all remind me that life is a gift ... “

Messages to myself, laying awake one night

“Uganda? Hmmm. Were you there doing mission work?” “No.” “Did you have bodyguards?” “Oh, no.” “The land of Idi Amin, huh?” “Actually Uganda is a place of incredible beauty and hospitality. You definitely should go sometime.”

Exchange with American flight attendant on Brussels to New York flight. One brief conversation, three prevailing stories of Africa—a continent for Americans to save; a continent not of gifts but only to fear; a continent of impoverished leadership. What a contrast to the story of the incredible people at the gathering, the riches to draw from their lives and witness. How will a new story be experienced between America and Africa, a story of a rich exchange of gifts, a story that transforms us all, that makes our Christianity more Christian in each place, our existence in the world not neutral or innocuous but noticeably different—an interruption and visible sign of the life-giving presence of Jesus and his cross and resurrection amidst the deepest brokenness?

** What a joy, to organize this gathering and invite participants in partnership with friends and co-convenors Mennonite Central Committee, World Vision/Uganda, Africa Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries, and the Global Network for Reconciliation. Thank you Gann and Dale, James and Bill, Celestin, Nelson, and Jessica.