

Uganda- 2009

Keith Sharp

Saturday, January 31st, 2009, John Welch and I flew Kenya Air 2300 miles west to east across equatorial Africa from Lagos, Nigeria to Nairobi, Kenya, then about 400 miles back west to Entebbe (“Raid on Entebbe”), where the international airport for the nation of Uganda is located almost astride the equator on a peninsula jutting into Lake Victoria. Vicious dictator Idi Amin Dada (“The Last King of Scotland”) destroyed Uganda’s economy a generation ago, and the nation of 31 million people has never recovered. The vast majority of Ugandan’s live primitive lives in desperate poverty - less than a dollar a day income is common - and disease. Uganda has the world’s highest AIDS rate and the largest number of orphans per capita. John and I regularly found ourselves too overcome by emotion to speak. But Uganda is blessed by stunning beauty and natural attractions and is becoming a notable tourist destination.

In 2004 Daniel Aburu, a leader in the Pentecostal Church in Uganda, was sent to Fort Myers, Florida for training. There he encountered Dave Schmidt, Oscar Gavin, and Dennis Baron of the Southside Church of Christ, they converted him to Christ, and he returned to Uganda as a preacher of the gospel. He converted his wife Rosemary, her brother Francis Okech, and started congregations in the capital city, Kampala, and in Rosemary and Francis’ home city, Tororo, on the border with Kenya.

In December, 2005, Daniel ran over and killed his two year old son. The magistrate tried to arrest him for manslaughter, and Daniel fled the country, fell into a life of immorality, and has contracted AIDS. Rosemary has divorced him on grounds of adultery.

Francis Okech’s wife died giving birth to healthy twins in 2005. But when Daniel quit preaching, leaving no faithful preacher in Uganda, Francis resigned his prestigious job as head of international banking at Nile Bank in Kampala, sold his car, went to South Africa to study with Paul Williams, Dave Beckley, and Fred Liggin, and returned to Uganda to devote his life to preaching to his people.

I went to Uganda alone in February, 2007 to check on the situation at the request of the Southside brethren in Fort Myers. I found Francis overwhelmed by his preaching work in Kampala, in Jinja, an hour and a half to the east at the source of the Nile River, and in Tororo, three hours further east. Yet, he was maintaining congregations in all three cities and reaching the lost in Kampala and Jinja.

Rosemary has retaken her maiden name, Athieno, lives in Jinja, and is working to teach women, primarily in the Masese slum two miles from Jinja. Here the government forcibly resettled the Karamajong people, who had wandered naked behind cattle on the plains of Northeast Uganda and lived on a diet based on the blood of the cattle. These people live in squalid poverty, the women turning to prostitution and the men to thievery and gambling. Most of them are HIV positive, many have TB, and the children die of filth borne diseases. Many live

by retrieving chicken heads, feet, and entrails from Jinja dumpsters and boiling them into stew.

Rosemary has taken the women here the message of Christ and given them the joy of the hope of a better life in heaven. After they have proven their faithfulness for a year or so, she gives the poorest of them a tiny amount of money to start a little business, such as cooking and selling casava and beans. From her own money, Rosemary bought a tiny plot of land and built a little one room home for 70 year old widow Mama Ajambra, who lived in a one room rented apartment with a dirt floor, no door, and a roof that leaked like a sieve. She built a concrete house with a metal roof for Mama Kalyampengere (“one who eats dried, roasted maize”), who was living with her eight children under a shelter made of plastic. Rosemary has a terrible fault - she is so tenderhearted she spends virtually all the money she receives on these poor Christians crushed by abject poverty, filth, and disease.

Francis splits his income after preaching expenses with Rosemary. He drives a dilapidated Toyota van so he can take aged Christians and mothers with small children to worship. He would like to build a place to worship in Masese and allow the brethren there to be a separate congregation, freeing him from multiple trips Sunday morning to transport women and children to Jinja. We would like to see Rosemary receive her own, independent income.

When John and I visited the same congregations I had visited in 2007, we found that the Kampala and Jinja churches have doubled in size in two years, and the Tororo congregation has increased ten fold to about 400 members!

Francis has taught men in each congregation enough that they can carry on services when he is not there. Fredrick “Fred” Ofwono in Tororo is both preaching and reaching the lost in both Tororo and surrounding villages, though he was only converted in 2005. Fred is an unemployed electronics technician and would like a small business loan to start a copy and secretarial services business. His wife is the veterinarian for the area, being paid primarily in meat by the small farmers. They have five children, including fourteen year old Richard who assisted around Rosemary’s compound while we were there, attended our classes, and needs \$400 to start secondary school.

John and I taught classes under a tree in Rosemary’s compound in Jinja for young men who want to preach. We began with seventeen young men, and eleven completed our nine days of classes. The young men slept in makeshift, outdoor quarters, and Rosemary paid a lady a dollar per meal per person to feed them rice and tea for breakfast, tea, mush (maize meal boiled in water), and beans for lunch, and tea, cattle entrails, and greens for supper.

We also preached in Jinja, Kampala, Tororo, and Masese.

When classes started Monday, February 2nd, I was the most frustrated I can ever recall at trying to teach. I stupidly brought my own workbook on Acts, which is on a collegiate level. Virtually all the students knew next to nothing about the Bible, most didn’t own a Bible, about

half couldn't speak English, and we suspect three were illiterate.

John quickly adapted by teaching them simple sermon outlines they could use to preach, and they responded well. In the nine days he taught them about fifty sermons, some textual studies and some topical.

I was slower to adapt. Questions, even when translated, were met with a blank stare. They had never heard of textual analysis. After struggling painfully through Acts one, I followed John's lead, and just told the story recorded in Acts. We studied the first three chapters, then the nine "Cases of Conversion," some topical subjects, and ended with Paul's farewells to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38) and Timothy (2 Timothy 4:1-8) as the pattern for the work of a preacher by example and charge.

Eleven young, African men stood before an audience of their peers (and two old, white guys) and preached, and most did quite well (we think), even though for almost all it was their first time to speak before an audience. As classes concluded Thursday, February 12th, these young men told Francis they are now ready and determined to take the gospel to the people where they live. I don't think I have ever witnessed such progress in so short a span.

Conclusion

For a more personal, detailed description of the trip from John's perspective go to johnwelch-africa.blogspot.com. For more on the work of Francis Okech and Rosemary Athieno, click onto www.theworkofthelordinuganda.com.

Thanks to my wife Sandy for letting me go. While I was in Nigeria, and Sandy was visiting our daughter Michelle in Brooklyn, the pipes in our apartment in Evans Mills froze and burst and caused extensive damage to our apartment. When I asked Sandy if I needed to cut the trip short, she immediately and emphatically answered, "NO!"

Thanks to the brethren of the Tri-County Church of Christ for carrying on without me for six Sundays. With all the heavy, blowing snow, I couldn't have accomplished a lot at home.

Thanks to the brethren who paid my way. You made an investment with eternal returns.

Thanks to John Welch for being a great coworker and to Gloria for allowing him to go. I thought, as the veteran, I would teach John a few things. I learned more from him.

Thanks to the Lord for having the confidence in me to providentially put me into such fulfilling service. I get to meet and work with the God fearing Christians whose companionship I hope to enjoy throughout eternity. My heart overflows.