

Africa - 2009

Keith Sharp

January 8th John Welch left Indiana and I left New York to fly to Africa for five weeks of Bible teaching and preaching. It was my sixth trip to Africa and John's first.

Nigeria

We first spent three weeks teaching classes for preachers in Nigeria.

Nigeria is in equatorial West Africa, is the most populous African nation, with around 130 million people, and is hot, filthy, dangerous, over-crowded, and corrupt. Lagos, its commercial capital, has close to 17 million residents.

The gospel first went to Nigeria in 1948 via an American Bible correspondence course, and the seed of the kingdom found fertile soil indeed. Sixty-one years later there are many thousands of Christians in Nigeria, with congregations of up to 2000 members, and multiple hundreds of preachers.

Since 1973 World Bible School, an evangelistic corporation which solicits money from individuals and churches, has been the primary American influence among brethren in Nigeria and has carried the overwhelming majority of Nigerian Christians into extreme liberalism. "Church of Christ - Nigeria" is a national board of trustees claiming authority to own all property of churches of Christ in Nigeria, to determine which congregations can wear the name "Church of Christ," to exercise discipline in local churches, and to determine which American preachers may visit Nigeria. Africans Claiming Africa for Christ (ACAC) is an international, African organization. Among many congregations, the social gospel is rampant, and there is not the slightest idea of the need for biblical authority. In other words, institutional brethren in Nigeria have either already become or are on the cusp of becoming just another human denomination.

Nigerian Christians have great respect and love for American brethren. They will often come hear us even if they know they disagree with us.

I first taught in Nigeria in 1992 with Lowell Blasingame, Albert Dabbs, and Tom Kinzell. Between 1992 and 2006, no faithful American preachers visited Nigeria, whereas there was a large, steady influx of American liberalism. Brother Blasingame and I tried twice after 1992 to return together, but each time the American State Department warned us it was too dangerous. Since 2006 I have visited Nigeria three times, twice with Ed Lewis, and Paul Williams has visited twice with his grandson Joel.

My main purpose in Nigeria is to encourage and assist Nigerian preachers to combat the liberalism engulfing the brethren. We do this by teaching daytime classes for preachers, generally for a week at a time, in congregations in central areas which agree to host our classes. We team with respected, mature, faithful Nigerian preachers. We preach for the host congregation Sunday morning and where we are invited in the evenings throughout the week. We travel to the next teaching site on Saturdays.

This year John and I both spoke at the Victoria Street Church of Christ in Lagos, where Emmanuel J. "Manny" Ebong, Jr. is the preacher, Sunday morning, January 11th. In the year Manny has preached there, Victoria Street has grown from 170 members to 258.

On Sunday afternoon we drove sixty miles north to Ibadan, a city of 8 million, where we met Sunday Ayandare and Ezekiel Akinyemi at the home of Brother Akinyemi. These are perhaps the two most widely respected, faithful preachers in Nigeria. Manny and I left John to stay with Brother Ayandare and to work with both men at the Challenge Road Church of Christ where Ezekiel preaches. This congregation has classes throughout the day, five days a week, through most of the year to train young men to preach. This year 13 young men are enrolled.

Manny and I drove on to the home of George and Gloria Ebong in Ile-Ife, where we spent the week. Monday through Friday we had about ten preachers in class as well as several local Christians. Manny, George Ebong, and I shared teaching four to five hours a day, and I preached at various area congregations in the evenings. My class lessons were on "The Authority of Christ," "The Divine Pattern," "The Work of the Church," "Women Teachers" (by request), and "The Divine Organization for Evangelism - the Local Church." Manny taught a good series on "Effective Evangelism." On Friday Ajayi Ojeva, who was my driver in 1992, brought a powerful lesson to the classes on "Challenges to a Growing Church." That evening Manny and I spoke in the city of Osogbo, where Ajayi is doing an excellent work and staunchly holding the line against liberalism. Early in the week I developed a severe and very painful case of gout that

plagued me throughout my stay in Nigeria.

The following week, January 18-23, Manny Ebong and John Welch worked together in the coastal city of Calabar, on the border with Cameroon, while Sunday Ayandare and I taught together in Awka, capital city of Anambra State, in Igbo land. The preacher here at the Amaigbo Church of Christ is Benson Onwuchuruba, leader of the opposition to liberalism in Anambra State. Only three other preachers in this state faithfully hold to the divine pattern - Daniel Nnamani, Monday Egbakwe, and Eleazar Ekemezie, and they must subsist on the meager income of part time jobs, while preachers who cooperate with World Bible School rake in American dollars. Sunday taught an outstanding series on "Signs on the Road to Apostasy." My lessons were "The Nature of Authority," "The Divine Organization for Evangelism - the Local Church," "The Work of the Church," "Benevolence," and "The Church and the College." We had about 20 preachers in class in Awka, and Benson stated we had "moved mountains" in fighting liberalism. We preached at five other area congregations in the evenings and spent one evening "street preaching."

Our third week in Nigeria we worked in pairs Monday through Wednesday. John and Manny taught classes with David Kerume at Sapele Road in Benin City, while Sunday and I taught at Grey Street in Warri in the Niger Delta. Grey Street is a congregation of about 400 members and has two fine, mature preachers, Stephen Illuman and Sunday Eyanrim. They have an unusual double deck auditorium with a high pulpit between the two floors. We had 17 preachers in class here, including the local World Bible School "paymaster" and over 50 local Christians. Sunday taught his series on apostasy, while I taught "The Nature of Authority," "Congregational Cooperation - the Autonomy of the Local Church," and "Benevolence" (by request). We preached at two other area congregations in the evenings.

Thursday Manny, John, and I returned to Lagos, where John and I spoke to the ladies class Thursday evening, January 28th, and taught classes for preachers the next day. This included a lengthy, almost comical exchange with Brother Oji, the leading defender of liberalism in Lagos, in which he tried to find an evangelistic organization in the messengers of the churches in 2 Corinthians 8. Eleven preachers and an audience of 60 were present, and none seemed impressed with Brother Oji's arguments. In addition to Manny Ebong, Peters Obentey and Afolabi Akinyemi ably defend the truth in Lagos.

In 1992, Albert Dabbs and I taught 111 preachers in our classes in Uyo. This year, counting the one day class at Victoria Street, I had a total of about 60 preachers in all my classes. But faithful brethren were strengthened by our classes, and even preachers being paid by WBS often admit we are right. The chairman of the board of trustees for Church of Christ - Nigeria, a friend of Sunday Ayandare, called Sunday to tell him he had heard that Keith Sharp is in the country and that Sunday is working with him. Sunday will try to get a week of our classes scheduled in that brother's home congregation next year in the national capital, Abuja. There are far more than 7000 Nigerian Christians who have not bowed the knee to World Bible School or Church of Christ - Nigeria. As long as the Lord gives me the ability, I intend to return to encourage these good brethren. Thanks, Lowell, for introducing me to this work. I'll try not to let you or the Lord down.

Uganda

Saturday, January 31st, John 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. Uganda is vastly different from Nigeria. Vicious dictator Idi Amin Dada ("The Last King of Scotland") destroyed Uganda's economy a generation ago, and the nation of 38 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, leader of 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 paper. 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 by Daniel Aburu. 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. Les and Linda, if you're reading this, feel free to double over laughing.

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, New York 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 in Evans Mills for carrying on without me for six Sundays. With all the heavy, blowing snow, I couldn't have accomplished a lot there.

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.