

# Perilous presence: Christians in Uganda

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

“You can’t understand Africa without understanding religion,” said Emmanuel Katongole, a Catholic priest from Uganda. As he led a tour of Kampala, Uganda’s capital, it was soon clear what he meant. Slogans such as “Jesus cares” and “Try Jesus” adorn taxicabs. Ads for a Catholic bank named Centenary print the letter T as a cross. Businesses have such names as “Holy Light Clinic,” “Born Again Bankers” and “Holy Hair Care.” “There is no Western-style division between secular and sacred or public and private here,” Katongole said.

But the infusion of religion into everyday life has not made Uganda a peaceful land. “We have a culture in Uganda of taking power by the point of a gun,” said Archbishop John Baptist Odama. The archbishop’s see, based in the town of Gulu in the north of the country, has been the scene of a vicious civil war for the past 22 years. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has waged an antigovernment insurgency, savagely attacking rural villages and abducting children, who are turned into soldiers or sex slaves. An estimated 25,000 to 30,000 children have been kidnapped over the years.

Uganda’s president, Yoweri Museveni, himself took power at the point of a gun in 1986 after leading an uprising in the west of the country. The battle between Museveni’s National Resistance Movement and the then-government army, made up largely of Acholi people from the north, left some 300,000 dead. After Museveni came to power, northerners were left with no jobs but plenty of military training, resentment and time on their hands. They were ripe to be recruited for Kony’s army.

Museveni has run a relatively stable government in the southern region he controls. He is a wily politician, who switched the focus of the nation’s fight against AIDS from condoms to abstinence when Bush took power, and who made Uganda part of the “coalition of the willing” in the U.S. war in Iraq.

Katongole, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, stressed that the failure of political and economic systems to serve the country's people has left a vacuum that the church tries to fill. "What works is the church—not only for religion but for water, education, health care." Father Sebastian, a priest in Kampala, put it more forthrightly: "Only money from the church gets to the people. Westerners should really give to the church, not to our government."

A stunning case of the church stepping in to fill the void occurred in the north, where for years tens of thousands of Acholi children would leave their villages in the evening to walk to the town of Gulu to avoid being kidnapped by Kony's forces. Townspeople in relatively wealthy Gulu called the children "ants," since they were constantly underfoot. (These children came to the world's attention through the 2005 documentary film *Invisible Children*.) Archbishop Odama helped organize a walk of solidarity with the night-walking children. He gathered the Orthodox and Anglican bishops and the Muslim imam in Gulu to walk with him and to sleep on the street with the children. One parishioner brought a mattress for the cassocked archbishop. "Give it to the children," he said. When another worried about his safety, he said, "My security is linked with that of my people." Gulu Walk ([guluwalk.com](http://guluwalk.com)) has organized solidarity walks around the world.

Archbishop Odama helped broker a fragile peace between Kony's LRA and the Ugandan government, an act that opened him to charges of disloyalty from both sides. When an indignant government official questioned whether he was too close to the rebels, Odama replied, "For the sake of peace I will go into the bush." When the rebels accused him of being a government agent, he said, "I am also your bishop." Then he delivered the same message to both government and insurgent leaders: "Like two elephants you are walking on us."

Religious defiance of government authority has a venerable history in Uganda. People treasure the story of how in 1886, 45 Ugandan Christians—23 Anglicans and 22 Catholics—were martyred at the hands of the king, Kabaka Mwanga. The Christians were pages in the king's court. After they resisted the king's sexual advances, the furious Mwanga, who already believed that Christians were a threat to his kingdom, demanded that the pages pledge their allegiance to him, not to Christ. Those who defied their earthly sovereign were speared, and some were dismembered while still alive. Most were burned slowly, feet first, to give them a chance to recant. They sang hymns until they died.

On the martyrs' feast day, June 3, a million or more pilgrims travel to the Martyrs' Shrine at Namugongo. Many of the dozens of Catholics I met were named for martyr as are many of the country's institutions. In the chapel of a Catholic retreat center I saw a stained-glass window portraying martyr Charles Lwanga. The archbishop of Kampala is named Lwanga. Part of the martyred Lwanga's story is that he died just after baptizing a teenage boy named Kizito—and many schools today are named St. Kizito's.

Among the Christians working with the destitute are the Good Samaritan Sisters, an order founded in the wake of Idi Amin's brutal regime. One of the leaders recruited by the order is Sister Mathias Murumba, who heads the Santa Maria Goretti school for girls in Mukono. "You train one girl, you train the nation. Even these men here came from women," she said, her boundless energy and ease of laughter drawing laughter in response.

The students come from harsh backgrounds, and many of them have been abused. Many are AIDS orphans, and some have AIDS themselves. Sister Mathias boasts that all of her graduates get jobs. She investigates the workplaces to be sure that the girls will not be further mistreated. They are trained in sewing, secretarial work, agriculture, hospitality, English, catering, manicure and pedicure and computer work. More important, they are helped to grow in confidence. "We can start our own business after this," one girl said.

The 76 girls at Santa Maria Goretti are the lucky ones. Scholarships pay their \$200-per-trimester fee. When asked how she pays her teachers and maintains the building, Sister Mathias said, "I beg." When asked whether the archdiocese supports her, she turned and punched a priest beside her on the arm—which I took to be her way of saying no.

The group I traveled with to Uganda had started a small organization called Share the Blessings, which supports the installation of wells in rural villages in Uganda at a cost of \$1,500 apiece. It has also paid to rehabilitate the crumbling village school that Katongole once attended. Everywhere we went, Ugandans were very welcoming—they raised banners, brought out drums and dancers, gave speeches and banquets. But I noticed one such banner that said simply, "Welcome to our American friends"—nothing specific about our group. "They raise it during the American visiting season," one veteran U.S. traveler explained.

When we went to christen a new well that Share the Blessings had built in one rural village, children with distended bellies, bulging eyes and torn clothes appeared to pump their first clean water. The parents of these malnourished kids presented us with sugarcane, eggs, corn and a live chicken—generous gifts in gratitude for something that cost a North American church rather little.

At St. Kizito's school outside Luwero were hundreds of bright-eyed, hopeful students. Yet the school's computer lab had no Internet connection and only one terminal. Its library had no books for borrowing, only ones for sale—at a price no student could afford. As the principal addressed the children, he pointed to Katongole and visitors from North America and insisted, "If you work hard and trust God, you can be successful." He repeatedly mentioned the one graduate who the year before was admitted to Makerere University to study to be a veterinarian—implying that dozens of others have no such opportunity. Government scholarships are available in Uganda, but most are procured through bribes. An intern in Luwero, Meghan Good, told me of a graduate named Gonzaga with immense intellectual talent who is doing manual labor around the school while supporting a sibling's family. "He has no way to pay for more school," she said. She added, "The prosperity gospel isn't heresy here. It's more like trust."

The influence of charismatic Christianity is obvious in Ugandan Catholicism. Every Catholic church we visited offered "healing masses," in which parishioners can come forward not only for the Eucharist but also for the laying on of hands. Many claim dramatic healings. This is not surprising in a country where public health services hardly exist and hospitals serve only the paying customer.

"The biggest problem in Ugandan Catholicism is that we're losing people to the Pentecostals," Sister Mathias told me. "And if we have healing masses they come back." Healing masses can last four or five hours or more. Worshipers play drums and wave their hands during mass; they clap at the elevation of the host—the point in the mass at which bells once rang in European masses. "That's all from the charismatics," one priest told me. "They've influenced all of us."

A group of hyper-Catholic laypeople called the Marians presses both for greater piety and for charismatic expression: they kneel to receive the host, publish a monthly magazine promoting their goals and worry the hierarchy. "The bishops try to resist their excesses," Father Sebastian told me. Any hint that one mass is better than another, that one priest has more gifts to offer, is contrary to ancient Catholic

thought, yet it persists. “Since I’m not charismatic I’m looked down on,” Sebastian explained.

When I expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of charismatic healing, I was told to go see Father Gabriel Mpamibwe. “So how did you come to have the gift of healing?” I asked the white-cassocked priest, whom I’d just seen dancing with the students as part of the welcoming event for our group. “Well, I was dead for seven hours,” he said. How does a skeptical Westerner respond to that?

Father Gabriel told me the story of how a hole in his liver had led to his experience with death. He was wrapped in a shroud and about to be put in a casket when he sat up, spit the cotton out of his nose and mouth and asked to be untied. There was no Jesus to order someone to unbind him: the witnesses all ran away. “Since then I’ve had the gift of healing,” he said. He has traveled to Britain and India to practice his trade. He is the chief evangelist for the diocese—with a clear charge to win back Pentecostals. He is also the diocese’s chief exorcist. “Demons hate the name of Jesus,” he said.

When I asked Father Gabriel how he differs from the Pentecostals, he said he doesn’t ask for money up front as a condition for healing. If you do that, he said, it’s “a business, not a ministry.” If someone wants to give a gift afterward, that’s fine with him. He finds that those with doubts are those he most often helps—which contradicts the usual Pentecostal claim that one must believe to be healed. “It can’t be hard work. If you have to strain it’s your work, not God’s.” He tries to avoid talk of offering a special ministry: “The church is always charismatic, she can’t do without the Spirit. But the church is renewing herself now.”

Father Gabriel has a calm, joyful manner. The gleam in his eye makes you want to believe him. But Father Sebastian expressed his incredulity. “These people are our fanatics,” he said. And, he contends, money is changing hands in these services: “Father knows what to say to suggest a gift, even if he doesn’t demand it first.”

A more undeniable personal charism is that of peacemaking. Todd Whitmore, a Christian ethicist at Notre Dame, is on the hunt for it in the north of Uganda. “Christian ethicists in North America talk a lot about war, but most have never seen one. And they talk a lot about social location, but they do so from the library.” Whitmore was influenced by what he learned at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and it inspired him to live in the IDP (internally displaced people)

camps in the north of Uganda, where he learned the Acholi language, gathered people's stories and, as he put it, "saw what real Christianity looks like." "The church never left northern Uganda" even when Ugandans of means and NGOs did. Seventy-eight Catholic catechists have lost their lives in the 22 years of fighting.

Whitmore found the most practically helpful people in the IDP camps to be the most apocalyptically oriented. "I call them reasonable apocalypticists," he said, and wondered if their outlook would shift with the coming of peace. In a war zone, they believe, no human effort could be relied upon for help—only God could intervene. In the U.S. people who talk that way are often accused of being mentally unstable. But in the IDP camps, "They were among the most rational. They'd ask, 'How do we cooperate with the NGOs?' Or 'We want to help with orphans.'" The Bible was written to people in crisis with promises of an intervening God; perhaps it is best read there.

This combination of a providential God and personal piety can be seen in the work of one extraordinary Ugandan woman. In 1996, Mama Angelina Atyan's daughter Charlotte was kidnapped by the LRA from a Catholic boarding school, along with 138 other students. A determined nun followed the LRA into the bush and browbeat their commander, forcing him to return all but 30 of the students. But Charlotte was not among those who returned. "We cried for weeks," Angelina said of her then-14-year-old daughter's abduction. "Then we asked ourselves, 'Will we only cry?'"

Mama Angelina and mothers of other abducted children began the Concerned Parents' Association (CPA) to advocate for their loved ones and badger policy makers to resolve the conflict. Mama Angelina eventually spoke to the United Nations about her cause, which was championed by Hillary Clinton, among others.

President Museveni launched military ventures that promised to crush the rebels, but Mama Angelina, with a daughter in that rebel army, hardly wanted to see Charlotte crushed. CPA members would fast on Saturdays for the return of their children, and while praying during such a fast, Mama Angelina focused on the words, "Forgive us our trespasses." She realized that she hadn't forgiven the ones who had so grievously trespassed against her.

"God wants us to be practical Christians," she said. She sought to forgive her child's abductors. She visited Joseph Kony's mother and offered her forgiveness to a woman whose child was surely as lost as her own. "The magnitude of one another's pain

binds us together," she explained. She claims to have unconditionally forgiven an unrepentant Kony himself.

One night during Charlotte's seventh year of captivity, Angelina prayed and reminded God that in scripture the seventh year is the year of liberation. "Have you forgotten or changed? My daughter is not one but a great multitude."

That same night, Charlotte, now the mother of two children by an LRA commander, had a dream in which she was set free. "Today you will see your people," she heard a voice say. The next day, when the column of abducted child soldiers and wives was marching, Charlotte heard a voice tell her "Go left"—when the LRA went right. Obeying, she walked away, unnoticed by her captors. She was reunited with her mother, and her children are now with her. For Charlotte, however, the joy is incomplete: part of her is with the people who are still captives in the bush with Kony.

Amid the violence of Uganda, Christians are practicing forgiveness, reaching out to abused children, caring for the sick and seeking miraculous healings. Christianity is only 100 years old in Uganda, but perhaps, Katongole muses, the Ugandan church is now "at the height of our fervor. We may be at our peak."