Posttraumatic Christians: Lamentation in Africa

by Chris Rice in the May 1, 2007 issue

Last November I traveled to a restful location outside of Kampala, Uganda, to spend three days with African Christian leaders who are trying to address the destructive conflicts in their countries. They represented a “United Nations” of Christian denominations and traditions—Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostal and Mennonite. Among them were pastors and university presidents, directors of peace centers and grassroots practitioners.

I worried that these diverse Christians would not find a common connection. What a surprise in the opening session to learn that all knew—and sang enthusiastically—the praise song “Shine, Jesus, Shine.” If they agreed on anything across ecclesial and regional borders, it was that worshiping Father, Son and Holy Spirit was at the heart of faith. And what a shock to learn that these African Christians had another common connection, a dramatic and loaded issue that jarred and silenced us Americans. For the second language they spoke was the language of trauma.

Trauma. The word was repeated in various forms—traumatic, traumatized, trauma healing. In hour after hour of conversation, I was struck by the casualness with which they spoke of people they knew being killed or dying early deaths, as if these were daily facts of life. I realized that *trauma* is regional shorthand and that behind every use of the word are personal and social experiences of pain and horror, experiences that emerged in stories told throughout the first day.

Anglican leader Daniel Deng Bul of Sudan has done pastoral ministry at a Bible college, directed food and water initiatives, and promoted grassroots peacemaking. But he wasn’t in a hurry to get to all that. Instead he told the story of how seven of his wife’s family members were killed. Josephine Munyeli of World Vision Rwanda shared details of the murder of her parents during the 1994 genocide, when, in just over 100 days, a million Rwandans were killed by fellow Rwandans. A group of killers hunted from house to house for Josephine. “My Christian neighbor was among them,” she said.

Pie Ntukamazina of Burundi told of confirming 100 parishioners in the morning, walking home and being ambushed by rebels in the afternoon, finding refuge in a mango tree that night, seeing snakes climb up beside him, and then remembering the text of his confirmation sermon, “For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” That night, he said, “I was reduced to nothingness.”

The urgency with which the Africans spoke about all this pain was a strange contrast to middle-class American church life. Though we know about deaths in Iraq and murders in the inner city, it’s hard for us to be disturbed, let alone to stay disturbed and admit how messed up this world is. We rush to fix things, or imagine they can easily be fixed, without naming and tarrying with the depth of the trauma.

Here no one was in a rush to get through their painful stories. The voices of Daniel, Josephine, Pie and many others seemed to join those of the psalmists who cry out, “Where are you God? Why are you taking so long? Show yourself! Don’t you see the wicked are winning?” The African Christians gathered here had learned to lament. This was not a howl into a void but, like Bishop Pie’s silent cry from a tree, a desperate prayer to God in the darkness.

Macleod Ochola of Uganda told how his wife had been killed by a landmine and his daughter raped by a member of the Lord’s Resistance Army. A few days later his daughter killed herself. As he spoke he wept, then decried the widespread killing in the north and the divided politics of Uganda. I heard an echo from the words of Rachel: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more” (Matt. 2:18).

Here was a dramatically different starting point for the church’s mission. If the expression of such pain could in any way be a gift, it was an agonizing one: the capacity to be disturbed, to insist that things are not at all as they should be, to believe that somehow God must intervene for the world to have hope, and that only by receiving God’s gifts is there hope.

Later that day, as the group reflected on these and other stories, someone asked: “How do we answer this horror? Is the church a sign of hope or is it part of the problem?”

Emmanuel Kolini, a church leader from Rwanda, commented, “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?”

As a leader from Uganda put it, “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.”

The story of Christianity in the region is complex. I remember that after the genocide, a church leader in Rwanda noted that until 1994 Rwanda had been known as one of the best-evangelized countries in Africa. If you wanted to learn about revival or about how to plant a church, he said, Rwanda was where missionaries and missiologists told you to look. In light of the horrors, however, the same leader was now saying, “The task now is to re-evangelize Rwanda.” Somehow the church had to start its work all over again.

But the African leaders at this gathering seemed to be pressing a deeper question. What kind of church *are* we? What kind of Christianity are we evangelizing people into? As Emmanuel Kolini has asked, “How do we form Christians who say no to killing?”

The question calls for a conversion of Christians, a re-formation that rejects a sentimental vision of success and learns to lament, a process that teaches us to insist on deeper explanations. It is a way of being Christian that does not say “forgive and forget,” but takes the world’s trauma seriously and learns how to remember and how to react to the memories. “When something horrible happens, it’s how you react that is crucial,” said Bishop Daniel. “Leave vengeance to God; give your enemy water and food. We have to forgive to gain the life of our country back. Christians must become a cooling system for all this pain.”

This way of being Christian produces a unique kind of leader, like the Rwandan pastor who spoke of “loneliness, rejection and disappointment” as the price of being a prophetic presence reaching across boundaries of tribal and national loyalty.

It is a way that requires “back up,” a Sudanese leader said as he called for a holistic vision of reconciliation in helping pastors and congregations address their communities’ needs for food, clean water, and economic development. This way of being Christian sees reconciliation not as an event or an achievement but as conversion into a long journey.

On our final evening together, we Americans realized the incredible courage it had taken for these leaders to come to Uganda. Congolese United Methodist bishop

Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda of Zimbabwe told how he was haunted by the history of Idi Amin, of Uganda’s war with the Congo. He said he had never been to Uganda and was terrified when he arrived at the airport.

But then “Emmanuel, a Ugandan, embraced me when I walked in. I had never worshiped with someone from Sudan, and here there is a Sudanese,” he said. “Here there have been Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics and Pentecostals, all worshiping.” With a laugh, he declared that he was extending his stay in Uganda for two days. “If reconciliation happens, they will say it started here. I am going back to the Congo with a new story to tell.”