

## **CHRISTIAN FAITH AND UGANDA'S STORY**

by Mrs Janet Museveni

It gives me so much pleasure to be here with you in South Africa at such a time as this. It is truly a time of big challenges but it is also a time of mighty blessing, if our hearts are listening to God, if we are willing to work with God. God is working all the time and when we walk and work with Him then our hearts and our works become great works. If we join God where He is working, then we become co-creators with Him.

I would remind you of Ezekiel's experience in the valley of Bones in Ezekiel 37 in the Valley of Bones. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones and also breathe on them that they may live. And, indeed, after Ezekiel did what God told him to do, instead of dry dead bones, there stood a mighty army in front of him. Therefore I want to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of this conference, especially my brother, Dr Michael Cassidy, who did so much to get us all together to share our experiences in order to advance the work of God's Kingdom here on Earth.

My sharing of our experiences in Uganda is not so much because we have all the answers in a package, but I am trusting the Lord, who saw it fit to send me to this South African gathering, to show me the way to inspire you. We of the household of God have a duty to bring to our world, to our villages, to our offices, the powerful messages from God our Father, to provide real solutions where there seem to be none, to provide real light where there may be darkness.

I have been asked to share the Uganda story of the struggle against HIV/Aids from a Christian perspective. Let me begin by saying that sometimes, when life throws nasty shocks at us, it is to jolt us into a heightened state of alertness, and it creates extraordinary opportunities for us to be innovative and creative to overcome the problems and challenges of the moment. This is what happened to us in Uganda when we suddenly discovered HIV/Aids, a disease with no known cure which was threatening to wipe out entire sections of our population. HIV/Aids was – and is – an extraordinary problem, demanding extraordinary measures to fight it. If it had not been so, we in Uganda's civil society would probably have left it to Government to handle in the usual manner through the Minister of Health, and perhaps the story would have been different. As it was, the disease was such that we were confronted with death and it got everyone's attention.

I need to take you back in time to tell you that HIV/Aids hit Uganda when our society was already down. More than two decades of wars and bad governance had already brought the country to its knees economically. The health infrastructure was in shambles, and socially there was a real breakdown of family life, traditional values and a general decline in moral conduct aggravated by poverty and displacement of entire communities. When HIV/Aids came into this chaos, it simply spread like wild fire.

However, I need to also mention here that Uganda had a very strong church history, even though it lacked fire among its membership from time to time. There was always a remnant of the old Revival Movement which never abandoned God. In fact, in the most challenging of times, churches would fill to overflowing and even when Idi Amin was persecuting Christians, the Church actually went underground – and prayed even more. The man who started the African Children's Choir which sang at the assembly, came to Uganda at the time and started an orphan's group which he called "The Ambassadors of Hope", from which the choir came.

In the years that followed, from 1981 to 1986, many families were forced to separate, freeing the men to go to war. The women fled with their children into exile in neighbouring countries. My family was one of those, but when we reached neighbouring Kenya, we formed a prayer group that prayed until God gave us a breakthrough by ending the war and opening the doors for us to go back home. And how did we do that? At a time when everything seemed so bleak, we remembered the promises of God in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." We decided to take God at His word and we humbled ourselves and took time to seek His face. And by His grace and mercy, He did His part.

However, it did not take us too long before the euphoria of our homecoming was overshadowed by the

challenges we met by going home. The biggest challenge was a shattered nation, literally on its knees. As in Nehemiah, I can testify to what I did and what I know many of my countrymen and women also did. Nehemiah said: "I sat down and wept and mourned for many days." After that I prayed Nehemiah's prayer for a long time.

First of all, I took responsibility for our nation's sins in prayer for God's forgiveness. Then I confessed my own sins to God and the sins of my father's household. Then, like Nehemiah, I prayed: "Remember I pray the word you commanded your servant Moses saying: 'If you were unfaithful I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet will I gather them from there and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling place for my name.'"

By His grace, God pulled us up and we joined hands together and we started rebuilding the walls of Uganda the Nehemiah way. I must confess, though, that we still fall, but He raises us time and time again. He is teaching us slowly the characteristics of Nehemiah:

1. Zeal – The zeal for the honour and glory of God and the passion to magnify Him.
2. Commitment – He is teaching us that the commitment of a leader moves others to follow in compassionate service to your neighbour.
3. Practical Wisdom – This is an area where Africans, especially African leaders, Christian leaders, or leaders in ordinary life, need to pray a lot because over the centuries Africa has had a problem of failing to act when it is faced with life's challenges. We have tended to be overwhelmed and, instead of striving to find solutions, we just look on paralysed. But even when we try, sometimes we come out with solutions that are not practical or simply lack wisdom. We need to pray that God may teach us and also give us the ability to make realistic plans to get things done. We can learn from Nehemiah if we study his methods of work. He first secured letters of reference from the king for the building materials, for instance. Then he organised and supervised the actual rebuilding of the wall. At the same time, he arranged Jerusalem's defences, and maintained the morale of the work force till the job was done. He finished the wall in the record time of 52 days.

In Uganda, we have tried to reverse the trend of our past helplessness or apathy. We pray for God's wisdom and we work hard, believing, as you all do, that we have a duty and the means to change things. As a result of that, many things have actually changed.

In the case of HIV/Aids, we know the most important strategy in combatting this pandemic is still prevention. Over 90% of Ugandans now know what HIV/Aids is, how it is transmitted and how to avoid it. Therefore, we can say that the people of Uganda have acquired head knowledge about the disease. However, to achieve behavioural change, people must go beyond head knowledge and internalise the information at a level of conviction that will cause them to change a lifestyle. Therefore, we must relentlessly keep talking and exhorting the people so that they do not relax or get confused, especially with the advent of new drugs and condoms which have now become available, and which make HIV/Aids seem less dangerous.

Allow me now to share with you what my husband said at an HIV/Aids Conference in Italy in 1992: "I have been emphasising the return to our time-tested cultural practices which emphasised fidelity and condemnation of pre-marital and extra-marital sex. I believe that the best response to the sexually transmitted diseases is to reaffirm publically and forthrightly the reverence and respect every person owes to his or her spouse. Young people must be taught the virtues of abstinence, self-control, postponement of pleasure and sometimes sacrifice. And if we allow ourselves to agree that all that stands between life and death of a whole continent is only a piece of rubber, meaning a condom, then we are doomed already. This is still our stand as a nation. Our aim is to train our people to change their behaviour and to raise public awareness and response to such a level as will counter and neutralise even future epidemics that we may not know anything about right now."

My own work in all this has been mainly with the young people in our country. And it is my interaction with the youth that has given me hope in the midst of an otherwise dark and seemingly hopeless situation. My reading of the Word of God, especially the Old Testament, has shown me that whenever God permits something to destroy His people, such as HIV/Aids is doing today, He always makes sure He leaves a remnant. When the flood destroyed the world, He preserved Noah and his household and started all over again with that remnant. In Isaiah 1:9, the Word of God says: "Unless the Lord of Hosts had left us a small remnant, we would have become like Sodom. We would have been made like Gomorrah."

It is my conviction that the Lord has heard our cry and has seen our desire to change and He will spare some of us, especially our young generation. Out of our population of 24 million in Uganda, 11 million are young people under the age of 18. All of these were born in the age of HIV/Aids and, therefore, in one sense, they are exposed to great danger as they begin to be aware of their sexuality. But on the other hand we have been given the opportunity and responsibility to alert them about these dangers. And because they have not had time to get into bad habits, we can teach them a different kind of lifestyle that will ensure their survival. Whereas it is hard to change the behaviour of adults, it is relatively easy to shape the behaviour of the young. We do this through the school system and through the mass media. However, in order for these efforts to succeed, they need to be undergirded by the principles of the Word of God.

Therefore Christian friends of mine and I started an organisation which we called "The Uganda Youth Forum" over 10 years ago. Through this forum we have opened up a dialogue with the youth of Uganda. We invite them on a regular basis and interact with them, reaching them with life-giving and life-changing messages from the Word of God. We hold up role models for them. We discuss perplexing issues about their newly discovered sexuality, alerting them about the dangers in the adult world, such as substance and alcohol abuse, counselling them and giving them a platform to express their frustrations and their aspirations without fear of judgement. Thousands of young people flock to these conferences and now we have started taking the same activity up country to the four regions of Uganda. Involvement of parents through parenting seminars have also resulted in positive changes in family life.

My brothers and sisters, one thing we must pay attention to in the world today is family life. Family values have been bombarded by so-called modern trends in our social life and they have been eroded. Gone are the days when two adolescents could be punished for engaging in pre-marital sex. Our Do's and Don'ts are disappearing fast and, because there is no cohesion in family, the basic building block of social structures, things are truly falling apart. Yet we who believe in God have the ability to discern, even in this confusing age, what is wrong and what is right. And it is, therefore, our obligation to impart the right values to our children so that the human race does not self-destruct.

In our youth conferences and other youth activities, a good number of young people have so far signed cards committing themselves to remain sexually pure until marriage. Indeed, I keep some newspaper clippings of some of the youth testimonies in this regard. Today, Uganda is widely cited as a success story in the fight against HIV/Aids. The clearest indicator of progress towards success is that HIV/Aids infection has dropped from 30% in 1995 to 5% in 2002. Let me hasten to add that HIV/Aids is still a real problem in Uganda and 5% is still disastrous enough. Therefore, there is no room for complacency. The most encouraging news is that the greatest reduction in the number of new infections is now among the youth. Sadly, too many of the 11 million children of Uganda have been orphaned by HIV/Aids. The disease has also weakened the traditionally extended family system which could previously be relied on to absorb and cushion the orphaned child. The able-bodied uncles and aunts have also succumbed to the same disease, often leaving only the grandmothers to care for the grandchildren. And here I really want to applaud my brother, Bruce Wilkinson, who has taken the trouble to make the movie which I believe many of you have seen and which portrays the real story as I know it in Uganda. We must thank God for him and people like him.

For that reason, 15 years ago, I founded Uganda's Women's Effort to Save Orphans, the backbone and strength of which is the network of women volunteers throughout our country. Early on we realised that placing the children in orphanages and institutions was not the best solution. A child as much as possible needs to grow up in a given community and have a sense of belonging and identity. Therefore, we decided to work with the communities where these orphans belonged and to make the old grandmothers and poor foster families our partners in this work, for the saying is, indeed true, that "It takes a village to raise a child."

By empowering the women through training and through micro-credit schemes, we are giving not only the orphans but also the other children in the household and the entire family a better standard of living. My experience of more than a decade in this work has taught me that knowledge, the strength of any country, is truly in its people, even the old and the poor. People in these poor communities are the true, albeit unsung, heroes and heroines of the trying period we have been going through.

What we must discourage ourselves from doing, is looking at the magnitude of the problem in its totality, for then we will feel like giving up altogether. Instead we, who are called by His Name, must redeem the time, knowing that we are co-workers with God and that the burdens we struggle with today are indeed the blessings of tomorrow.

I want to conclude with a story, about how birds got their wings, which will best illustrate what I mean. The story goes that initially they were made without wings. Then God made the wings, set them down before the wingless bird, and said: "Take up these burdens and carry them." The birds had sweet voices for singing, and lovely feathers that glistened in the sunshine. But they could not soar into the air. When asked to pick up the burdens that lay at their feet, they hesitated at first, but they obeyed, picking up the wings with their beaks, and setting them on their shoulders to carry them. For a while the load seemed heavy and difficult to bear, but soon, as they continued to carry the burdens and to pull the wings over their hearts, the wings grew attached to their little bodies. They quickly discovered how to use them and were lifted high into the air. The weight had become wings.

This is a parable for us. We are the wingless birds and our duties and tasks are the wings God uses to lift us up and carry us heavenwards. We look at our burdens and heavy loads and try to run from them. But if we carry them and tie them to our hearts, they will become wings. And on them we can then rise and soar towards God.

There is no burden so heavy that, when lifted cheerfully with love in our hearts, will not become a blessing to us. God intends for our us to be helpers. To refuse to bend our shoulders to carry a load is to miss a new opportunity for growth. No matter how overwhelming any burden God has lovingly placed with His own hands on our shoulders, is a blessing.

The end product of HIV/Aids is sickness. It is poverty. Children without parents and death. It is not for us to judge and condemn. Jesus came into the world not to condemn but to save. Our role is to reach out to a world that is hurting and demonstrate the compassion of the Lord. Ours also is the temptation of succumbing to despair because of the many bad reports around us. As my husband says, we must take a combative approach to this disease because there is sometimes a lot of pessimism about Africa, as if the African race is coming to an end. This is not the case. The African people will survive. They have survived many problems and I am sure they are going to survive this one as well.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, there is so much work to do. God has brought us here together not so we can look to man for help, but so that, together, we can lift our eyes and see where our help comes from and be strengthened. We are not alone. We will return to our homes together in the harvest. For the Lord's fields are truly ripe.

As I conclude, please allow me to say that I have felt challenged by what you, my brothers and sisters, are doing here, and I applaud you. That you should make the time to arrange SACLA II to seek God's face, to ask Him for His wisdom, to show that you need Him in your nation-building, is truly commendable, and I pray that He hears you, that He blesses your efforts abundantly, that indeed He gives you the wisdom to discover real solutions and that He showers you with the strength to overcome these giants, so that the rest of Africa can learn from you. Because of these efforts and from elsewhere, may our God in His goodness, find it in Himself to forgive Africa and completely heal this our continent for us and our future generations. May God bless you all.