

has no right to choose for themselves. Leaving Islam is like betraying your family and God, and that is blasphemy. All blasphemy in Islam is punishable by death," he explained. Al Faki is one of many examples.

Al-Faki was a teacher in a government school in Sudan. He had spent five years in further education in the Gulf and taught in the Gulf for a while. It was on his return that he became interested in Christianity. "When Al-Faki became a Christian, he tried to witness to his family, but then he suffered terribly," said the church elder. "He spent a year and a half in prison, where he was tortured by the security police. During this time in prison he suffered a stroke and his right side was partially paralysed. Fortunately, we were able to get him out of the country. He is just one of several who have been persecuted and tortured for becoming Christians."

These stories of persecuted Christians in Sudan are just some of many examples around the world, and through the history of the Christian faith, of faithful Christian communities in hostile contexts.

Who Is the Church? My Journey

Who, then, is the church? What distinguishes and authenticates a particular community as "the people of God"? Many Christians dismiss this question. Do we not all know who the people of God are? Do we not see them, especially on Sunday mornings, with their different traditions and forms? Do we not know their leaders: apostles, prophets, evangelists, bishops, priests, pastors, reverends, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters?

The question becomes critical when one considers on what basis people consider themselves to be "church". Is it because of the day on which they gather? Is it because of the building in which they meet? Is it down to the structures of their leadership and organization; the Scriptures they read; the songs they sing; or the rituals they practise? Does any claim to some devotion to the Bible legitimize a group as church? Is it enough that people call themselves Christians and invoke the name of Jesus?

The question "Who is the church?" is deeply personal. I was born and grew up in it; married in it; my wife and I brought up our children in it; and I have given most of my life to its service, knowing and trusting that I was

serving the Lord. What I write in this book emerges out of my story, and in many ways is part of my story.

I grew up in a Christian family. My father and mother were deeply committed to Christ and the church, something they had learned through the East African Revival movement,¹ of which they were first-generation adherents. My father served as an itinerant evangelist, catechist and lay reader in the then Native Anglican Church (currently known as the Church of Uganda). At that time, a lay reader, in addition to being in charge of a church covering a village area, had oversight of other churches within a sub-parish area. I recall that at one stage he was overseeing ten churches. The administrative tradition in the Native Anglican Church was to transfer priests and other pastoral church workers from one parish to another, each spending on average between two and ten years in one area. As a family we were moved around a lot in several sub-parish areas in my native area in the south-west of Uganda, as my father evangelized villages and nurtured young congregations. So I grew up as a child of the church, drinking her milk and eating her readily available bread, of which my father was a chief dispenser. Baptized as an infant, I was nurtured in the faith by my parents. I learnt how to read and write, not in a nursery school, but alongside the catechism classes that my father conducted in a “church school”. My father tells me how as early as age six I used to sing with joyful faith and sure certainty the song “When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more ... I will be there”.² My parents’ faith was truly mine.

All my primary-school education was in church-owned schools, with “school prayers” every morning and compulsory attendance of church services on Sundays. When I completed primary school and went to boarding secondary school I looked forward to freedom, not only from the watchful eyes of my parents, but also from church. To my joy, chapel was not compulsory at this school. So I not only strayed away from church; I also strayed away from the faith of my childhood, into all manner of youthful pursuits.

I guess I had, as a young child, taken church for granted. It was in my third year of high school that I heeded the call of Christ and recommitted

1. The Revival, a movement reckoned by some analysts to be the most important development in the church's life in Uganda in the twentieth century, was one of protest, renewal and reform. It originated among the indigenous lay people of the church in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, and missionaries, members of the Ruanda Mission, a small mission formed out of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the late 1920s. The movement spread to the East Africa countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Southern Sudan.

2. James M. Black, 1893.

myself to him. At the time, another revival had broken out in the schools and colleges in East Africa. Thus, although I reconnected with church, it was not church as I had known it while I was growing up. I got very involved with a Scripture Union group, through which we would meet with other Christians for fellowship and outreach. I learned to read the Bible for myself and with others. This was life: exciting, challenging and worth fully signing up to! I had questions about the church I grew up in. The nominalism and lack of vitality that I saw in my mother church created unease within me about the Church of Uganda. I was particularly perturbed by priests and other pastoral workers who seemed to live double lives; they did not practise what they professed. Some even spoke derogatorily about the work of the Holy Spirit – in particular, about speaking in tongues, an experience I had grown to cherish. I therefore preferred to be connected henceforth with the new charismatic and youthful Deliverance Church. I even got rebaptized by immersion, renouncing my infant baptism as ineffectual and invalid since it had been done for me and was by sprinkling, a form that I had now been persuaded was unbiblical. At university I did not really care much about which church I attended on Sundays. It did not seem to matter, provided it was not Roman Catholic or Seventh-Day Adventist, or part of those other cults that we had been warned about in the Christian Union!

It was in the middle of my graduate studies in 1980, while pursuing a master's degree in physics on a career path to teach at university, that the quest deepened. It became clear to me then that my life-long vocation and service was not to be in the teaching of physics at university. The moment of reckoning for me came when I was confronted with Paul's testimony of the vision of his life, as he enunciated it to the elders from the church in Ephesus in Acts 20, in particular verse 20: "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Thereafter, at the invitation of the national evangelical student movement in Uganda, the Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS), I quit graduate school and took on a vocation of an evangelist, Bible teacher, trainer and coordinator for Christian ministry among students. I was involved in it for just over twenty years, both at national and international level, with FOCUS and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), respectively. My first encounter with IFES was as a young staff member at an international students' conference in Austria in 1980, an experience that expanded my horizons to appreciate diversity in the community of the kingdom of God.

FOCUS was a member movement of IFES as well as one of many “para-church organizations”. We prided ourselves on serving the church among students, without being committed to any particular denomination (non-denominational). Without saying it out loud we really believed we were the real church – more “church” than the denominational churches. Moreover, those of us who served as leaders in the para-church movement considered ourselves to be Christian leaders.

I could not avoid the question of committing to a local church for too long, however. When my wife Theodora and I got married in 1983, she demanded we commit to a particular local church, a church where we would feel at peace providing a context for the nurture of the faith of our children. I knew what she meant: the Church of Uganda. I was uncertain, because at the time I really had issues with some of the practices in the Church. I cannot remember that I prayed much over this decision. It was more a matter of retracing my footsteps back to the church of my childhood. My brothers and sisters in the Deliverance Church dubbed me their missionary in the Church of Uganda!

It was the idea that I was a Christian leader that caused me to consider ordination. How could I be a lay Christian leader without that sense of belonging and being accountable to a particular local church? I had an uneasy feeling of being a Christian leader without accountability to a leadership in a local-church structure. By this time I had completed a course in theology at Wheaton Graduate School in the USA, so I was also referred to as a lay theologian. In 1995, therefore, I was ordained in the Church of Uganda and continued my service in the student movement. I was amazed at how my being an ordained minister caused some of my colleagues in the student movement to treat me with suspicion. In 2001 I joined the Church Mission Society – the missionary society that had sent pioneering missionaries to Uganda – as director for its work in Africa. For four and a half years I lived on two continents: Europe and Africa. I was licensed as a minister in a church in a suburb of London and I spent a lot of time travelling across Africa, meeting with church leaders – in particular archbishops and bishops – talking about evangelism and mission. I also spent many hours in mission conferences in the UK and in Africa. I was stretched in my faith and understanding of the church.

I was deeply troubled to discover a depressed church in the UK, the home of the missionaries who had evangelized many peoples in Africa. I will never forget my visit to a church in a village in the UK. There must have been

about fifty people in the congregation. The singing was more like a dirge. I gained a clearer picture of the congregation when the service came to an end. As each person walked out, half the congregation needed the physical support of the other half. I reckoned that those who were supporting others would themselves need that support in the not-too-distant future. The average age of the congregation must have been well over seventy-five years. At the end of the service I asked the priest, a middle-aged man, where the "others" were (by which I meant young families, the middle-aged, teenagers and so on). With a tinge of weariness in his voice he said, "They do not come to church."

I was also distressed as I travelled in various African countries. The much-talked-about vibrant church across Africa troubled me, as I came across countless situations where the churches were evidently part of the problem and not always the solution. Granted, there were great numbers on Sunday morning flocking to the church centres and buildings for worship services, but where was their impact on Monday to Friday in the market place?

As mentioned in connection with Senzani's story earlier in this introduction, when I travel I often take the opportunity to speak to strangers that I meet on flights or at the various airports as I wait. I often ask about religious or church affiliation as a conversation starter. I recall asking a man, while we sat together in a lounge at Nairobi airport, whether he went to church. "I used to go many years ago," he answered. "I stopped because going to church was like going to a party. When it is all over, people just walk away without even talking to you. I got nothing out of it." He said it in a matter-of-fact way. There are many like him who have rejected church, not because they have rejected God or faith in Jesus, but because of its trappings and traditions, conflicts and wars that are part of the history of the church: a history that posits Christianity as religion. The perception of "church" as another religion is repulsive to them. "Church" for them is one of the factors for the fracturing of society; it alienates them; it does not help them to deepen their relationship with God, but rather seems to be disconnected from and out of touch with the world as it is in their daily lives and routines. For them, "church" is a negative experience and something to shun.

I was once on a short holiday at a resort hotel on the shores of the Indian Ocean in Kenya. I got chatting with Julie and her teenage daughter Emma, who hailed from Essex in England. As is usually the case, after I had introduced myself as a bishop the conversation turned religious. We talked about church. I confessed how reluctant I often am to introduce myself to strangers as a bishop because of the stereotypes of church ministers. Julie,

however, wanted me to feel at ease. She quickly explained to me, "Religion is the job you do." I quickly interjected that it was important to distinguish religion from faith. I admitted, "Yes, religion may be seen as the job I do; but faith is the life I live. I do what I do because of faith." Emma then said, "Not everyone has to be religious, but everyone has to have a faith." Julie explained that the church they knew was the Church of England. "My mother used to say to me when I was young that you did not have to go to church to be a good Christian," she explained. Emma chipped in: "She was right. I hate going to church. It's boring." She hoped that my church was different! You can imagine my embarrassment, given that my church is part of the same tradition. It was clear to me that neither of them wanted any association with church as they had come to know it.

I was ordained as a bishop in the Church of Uganda and served in the heart of Kampala as the Assistant Diocesan Bishop. There my restlessness with the contemporary church grew even deeper. It was the same story: large numbers but little impact on society. I have been amazed at how much people love the trappings of religion. The official way I was addressed was "My Lord Bishop". I tried, with not much success, to stop people calling me this, knowing that this "lordship" was not only irrelevant in Uganda, but in fact a title loaded with a history in Europe that we should be ashamed of. Moreover, it was a title that carried with it notions of episcopacy and episcopal power that were contrary to its essence. Some leaders and many Christians in the Church of Uganda consider me cantankerous for refusing the title. What is more, bishops are also called "religious leaders" and treated as such. They are the chief doers of religion. I am numbered among them, but I am restless. There is something about it all that does not feel right.

What has given me most joy is not all the religious "stuff" that comes with the office of a bishop. It was not even my visits to the largest of the congregations, whose contributions to the diocesan quota was large. It was the time I spent with young people in residential camps where denominational affiliation did not matter; with children in children's churches with their vulnerability and abandon visible in their singing; with the thriving and yet financially struggling congregations in the slums of the city, where I seemed to find vitality and religion-less desire for God and authentic, transforming faith. There are two congregations where my faith was rekindled and a hunger for more of God was awakened: in the death-row section of the national Maximum Security Prison in Luzira, and the chapel at the Mental Health Referral Hospital, Butabika. I often wonder what it is about these

two Christian congregations that gave me that deep sense of the presence of God and his people and made me long for more. The worship services were electric, with an air of expectation that God was present to give hope and courage to face an uncertain future.

Five years into the work as a bishop in Kampala, I began to feel restless, wondering whether the Lord was calling me to follow him into the trenches of advocating and championing the cause of justice and dignity for all people, irrespective of creed. Reading in the Gospels about Jesus' passion for justice, as well as in the prophets – particularly Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah – and seeing the context of injustice, deprivation, greed, idolatry and oppression in Uganda, combined with the deafening silence from ecclesiastical officialdom, I became even more restless. It became clear to me in June 2011 that the call on my life at this season was to move on. I therefore decided that I would take an early retirement from my position as a bishop to dedicate my life to the cause of social justice from the platform of civic organizations rather than the church. Isaiah's prophecy concerning the call of the servant of the Lord in 42:1–4, quoted in Matthew 12:18–21, is poignant: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory"! I submitted my request for early retirement to the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda. The House of Bishops accepted my request in January 2012 and I retired from my work as Assistant Diocesan Bishop of Kampala at the end of June 2012.

The Presence of God among the People of God

The presence of God: not a passive "God-is-everywhere" type presence, but a presence that stirs and gives life, joy, wonder and praise; a presence whose evidence is in the character of the community, both in its internal life and in relation to those outside. The people of God: identifiable because they display something of God's nature and character. In the words quoted at the start of this introduction Jesus warned that we should not be in haste to conclude that anybody with religious titles or forms and who speaks the *right* language of "Lord, Lord ..." belongs to him. He challenged us to look more deeply, at the fruit of their lives.

We may need to be more sympathetic to those who have lost interest in the church or have rejected it outright. The fruit they have seen in the lives of Christians and indeed the life of the churches they know is not attractive or tasty. For many, both inside and outside the church, the words "church"