

Philip and Laura Shero
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Rakai Visit Part II

Well, I had been planning to tell you about my visits to four churches. But that was before I was arrested by the police for preaching.

We were sitting under a Jackfruit tree in the front yard of Peter Ntale's house. The bulk of Kakono Church of Christ was gathered in the ample shade. Stephan had just finished sharing the good news with the church that two orphans in their care were now sponsored through our AIDS Orphans Program (AOP). That was when the OC (Officer in Charge) of the local police post pulled up on a motor scooter. His face was grim and set. One by one, several people from the shaded congregation walked down to the road to greet him and find out why he had come.

After a few moments of evidently fruitless discussion, the officer strode up to the tree and interrupted our meeting. I greeted him and tried to be friendly, but it was evident that he was not making a social visit. He shut down our meeting, claiming that it was illegal. And then he arrested me together with the local preacher (Peter Ntale) and William Mbulachalo (newly assigned counselor for the churches in the region). Since we wouldn't all fit on his 80cc motor scooter (onomatopoetically called a "piki-piki" here), he allowed me to drive my own truck down to the station.

At the Ssanje Police Post, we sat under a much smaller tree and were questioned for a while. The officer claimed that we were not officially registered as a church in the district, that the police had not been informed that a foreigner was to visit this area, and that any meeting of more than four people is illegal without express police permission. In actual fact, the churches of Christ and Christian churches have been duly registered with the government of Uganda for almost 20 years. Recently, the central government gave authority to individual districts to also register churches. However, the process is different in every district, and often the district leadership has not defined any process whatsoever (nor do they have a habit of sticking to a process once they make it up). The church at Kakono has been recorded in our annual report since 2001, but the "church certificate" we issued them did not satisfy the local OC. So, we were re-arrested and remanded to the District Police Headquarters.

By this time, Stephan (back at Kakono) had called several of our fellow missionaries in Mbale to ask for prayers and advice. Shawn warned me that the police would confiscate any of my personal property (including belt and shoes) if they locked me up. He advised me to park at the hotel where we were staying and walk to the Police Station without any extra belongings. I winced as we passed right through the town and watched the hotel disappear in the rearview mirror. The Police Headquarters was in another town several miles away. So, I had no opportunity to prepare myself.

However, I did discover that our captor was a native of Lira District north of Mbale. I greeted him with my few words of Lango and learned that his father was a resident of the IDP camp where we have been taking food for refugees for several years now (due to the LRA rebels). He became embarrassed that he had arrested the people who were

feeding his father at home, but he had already called ahead and alerted the HQ that we were coming.

At the District Headquarters, we were guided to the DPC's office (the commander for all the police in the district). He studiously ignored our party of alleged criminals for 15 minutes before shunting us off to the office of the Special Branch. There, we were slowly grilled for an hour and a half. Many of the questions seemed designed to intimidate and create fear.

The Special Branch officer repeated the local OC's charge that we were an illegal church and that I was required to report to the police HQ before I visited Rakai EVEN if we were registered in the district. I asked if that meant that I was not free to move around Uganda without police permission. He replied that I was free to move around, but not to preach. He went on to describe a lengthy process for obtaining permission each time I visited, including asking permission from the local chief, having the chief write a letter to the local police post, having the local police write a letter to the police HQ, and finally me personally visiting the HQ on my way in and asking their permission (along with providing a detailed itinerary for my time in the district).

I knew the majority of this to be false, but I could not see a way to extricate myself from the situation. I prayed silently that God would help me not to lose my patience or show anger. I was aware even at the time that I was experiencing the effects of a spiritual struggle. Though I can now identify some of the physical factors contributing to our arrest, I know that our battle is not against flesh and blood. But I began to wonder if we would be released. We had passed the jail cells on our way in, and I did not want to spend the night inside. Just like in the movies, the prisoners were reaching through the bars and begging for attention as we walked by. One of them was beaten by a fellow prisoner during our visit, while the warden sat and listened.

Finally, to berate me further, the officer pulled out a file folder of letters from churches in the area introducing themselves to his office. He pointed to a "certificate of incorporation" on one page and demanded that I produce such a document for his file. At that moment, I remembered that one of the Kampala missionaries (Darla Bennett) had scanned in all of our registration docs and given them to me last year. I asked the officer if I might go back to my hotel and get the papers he wanted. He complained that it was closing time and then agreed that we could bring the documents the next day. After several more minutes of tongue lashing, we were released.

The church in Kakono had been anxiously awaiting our return for the past three hours. When we drove up, I felt like the Apostle Peter walking in on the church prayer meeting for his release from prison. I was hugged by everyone there, people danced, and the whole church praised the Lord spontaneously! It was quite a testimony to them, since most people who are arrested are subsequently imprisoned and not released without a substantial amount of money changing hands. We had not paid a shilling.

Back in Kyotera that evening (the town where our hotel was), I carried a USB flashdisk across the street to a secretarial service shop and printed out a complete file of our legal registration documents. The next morning, the officer was amazed to see us and very

pleased with the full file (20+ pages) of information more than any other church had provided. William had learned the day before that the officer was from his home area, so I greeted him in Lugwere and further cemented the relationship. By the time we left, the officer was downright friendly towards us. I promised to drop in and see him the next time I was in Rakai, and we drove off with permission to continue the rest of our visitation schedule.

Let me close with a few observations about the spiritual and physical background to this event. On the physical side, there were several factors that contributed to our arrest. The day before, there were riots in Kampala that resulted in the deaths of several Ugandans and one innocent Indian bystander. The police frequently mentioned this event and security as reasons for their actions. Secondly, we learned that another church group in the area had been involved in an orphan scam. It is likely that we were falsely identified with that group in the beginning. Third, the arresting officer had pressing business at the HQ, and I was a convenient source of transportation for him and his plaintiff in a local court case. He carried with him a handful of files, spent time with his superior officer going over cases, inquired about the status of a loan he had requested from the head office, and transported another officer back with us to his local police post. I doubt he would have or could have arrested me just for his own personal benefit, but my vehicle and fuel saved him money and helped him out. That may have contributed to our case going all the way to the HQ.

On the spiritual side, there are also potential reasons for our arrest. First, Rakai has always been a difficult area to work in. It was the hardest hit by AIDS in the 70s and 80s. It was the corridor for revolutionary armies coming up from Tanzania during the same years and saw constant bloodshed. And it was, until recently, the poorest district in the southern part of Uganda. All of these factors indicate to me a strong presence of evil spiritual activity.

But perhaps the strongest indicators of spiritual resistance are the inroads that Christ's church is making in the district, threatening long-term strongholds of darkness. At a recent evangelistic crusade by an independent ministry group, the witchdoctor known to be the most powerful in the area is reported to have sent demons to attack the meeting in the form of bees. As the bees swarmed over the stage and crowd, the crusade team began praying. Local people report that the bees instantly died and fell to the ground. As you can imagine, the crowd became much more interested in Jesus after that! Within our own movement, we have witnessed a number of significant Muslim conversions. There is now a new church of Christ in Kyotera town that began with the following converts: the wife of the local sheik, the headmaster of the Muslim school, his deputy headmaster, and five Muslim teachers! We would be foolish to think that our enemy would not strike back in some way or another.

Please pray for the new church in Kyotera as well as the other churches in Rakai, including the ones we visited this trip: Kabano, Kakono, Ssimba, and Kanajuka. We were able to give mosquito nets, mattresses, and blankets to six orphans in these churches as well as further support that is forthcoming from their sponsors in the US.

Yes, I intend to go back.

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