



REV. GIDEON BYAMUGISHA IN FRONT
OF HIS CHURCH IN UGANDA

Reverend Canon

Gideon Byamugisha

*Cofounder of ANRELA (African Network of Religious Leaders
Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS), Uganda*

WHEN REV. CANON GIDEON BYAMUGISHA, the prominent HIV-positive Anglican priest from Uganda, was two years old, he became very ill with smallpox. His family lived in a village in southwest Uganda, and the nearest doctor was 30 miles away on an island in Lake Bunyonyi. His mother carried him all the way to the lakeshore and found a girl with a canoe to take them to the doctor.

On the way, the boy wiggled free from his mother's arms and fell into the water. Unable to swim, the mother feared she had lost him. But the boy emerged, and she fished him out. Unfortunately, his struggle to regain his health was less successful. The doctor gave him numerous injections for smallpox but none appeared to work, and his mother returned to her village, virtually hopeless.

written by John Donnelly
photographs by Dominic Chavez

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Q&A

WITH GIDEON
BYAMUGISHA



In 1992, he became the first religious leader in Africa to declare publicly he was HIV-positive. He first told his fellow priests and students, then his family, and finally the world in a speech at an AIDS conference in Kampala. In 1998, the virus had turned into full-blown AIDS, and a few years later a doctor gave him six months to live. But a woman from California who had gotten to know him paid for his antiretroviral treatment, which then cost thousands of dollars per year, and he lived. “That saved me,” Byamugisha said.

He went on to start the African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV & AIDS, as well as the Friends of the Canon Gideon Foundation, which supports orphans and other vulnerable children with vocational and professional training.

But none of this has been easy. Byamugisha, 48, has faced one trial after the other, starting when his sister-in-law, Eunice Mari, told him that his wife, Kellen, had been HIV-positive when she died in 1991; they had two children together, but only one survived. He has since remarried, and he and his second wife, Pamela, who is also HIV-positive and widowed, have two children. They also take care of many orphans.

For days, the boy’s family prayed for his life. Then his grandmother told everyone an angel had appeared during her prayers, informing her that the boy would live and grow up to be a church leader like his father.

“That’s how I survived,” Byamugisha said in his home in the hills outside Kampala.

That’s also how he received his last name, which means “blessing.” His life, in turn, has been a blessing to those fighting against HIV and AIDS. The first of 14 children, Byamugisha has emerged as one of the forceful and innovative actors in Africa’s response, especially among church leaders and those living with the virus.

Q: What was your reaction to the news your first wife was HIV-positive?

“It was like a bombshell. I entered a kind of panic. I said, ‘You mean since my wife died of AIDS, I could also be positive? Me? A pastor, a born-again Christian?’ They had told us this was a disease of prostitutes.”

Q: How did you deal with your shock?

“My sister-in-law said something that changed my life. ‘Go for a test,’ she said. ‘And let me assure you of the love for you in our family.’ It was a statement that dried my tears. The eldest daughter of my wife’s family was not judging me, and instead assuring me of unconditional love. Sometimes, I look back and think without Eunice, I would be dead.”

Q: Once you learned you had HIV, how did you decide to make it public?

“I struggled. Should I talk or should I keep quiet? But on my mind was that if I kept quiet, I would be living a double life. It started with going to Eunice. She embraced me. She cried with me. She prayed for me. I went to the principal of the [Episcopal Theological] college. He was shocked. He told me he would do everything possible to help me, but I should not tell anyone about it. I told him blankly that I would not follow that advice. I went before my fellow brothers at the college, in a staff room, while we were having tea. I said to them, ‘Brothers, I want to tell you I’ve been to have an HIV test and I am positive.’ A hush fell on the staff room. Some patted me on the shoulder. No one said a bad word.”

Q: What are some of the lessons you’ve learned about AIDS since you began speaking out?

“There are two pieces of good news about AIDS. One is that HIV is 100% preventable. We have knowledge, skills, and resources to make it happen. The second message is don’t feel helpless about HIV. AIDS is vulnerable to information, vulnerable to places where you have a supportive community and people are willing to talk about it and help each other.”

Q: What challenges do you see in the next five years?

“I see two challenges. One is that the world may get so used to HIV and stop trying. People may say, ‘Well, AIDS is one of many problems.’ If we don’t keep up our advocacy, it could become like any other disease and the world would be willing to tolerate it. The second challenge is that we’re now getting a whole new generation that wasn’t exposed to what we know about HIV. So we can never stop teaching the basics. I hear all the time, ‘Excuse me, tell us where AIDS comes from.’”

Q: What gives you hope about meeting these challenges?

“The group that is walking with AIDS, sleeping with AIDS, they will not get tired. They are not going to keep quiet. We need to get to them, train them, empower them. They are our future saviors.”