

Kasese Better Living Center, Uganda

NATHANIEL MUMBERE WALEMBA

Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, D.Min. (Andrews University, Berrien Spring, Michigan U.S.A.), retired in 2015 as executive secretary of the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) of Seventh-day Adventists. In retirement, he is assistant editor of this encyclopedia for ECD. A Ugandan by birth, Walemba has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church in many capacities having started as a teacher, a frontline pastor, and principal of Bugema Adventist College in Uganda. He has authored several magazine articles and a chapter, "The Experience of Salvation and Spiritualistic Manifestations," in Kwabena Donkor, ed. *The Church, Culture and Spirits* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), pp. 133-143. He is married to Ruth Kugonza and they have six children and fourteen grandchildren.



Kasese Better Living Center, Uganda

Photo courtesy of Nathaniel Walemba.

Kasese Better Living Center is a center of influence managed by the Rwenzori Field as a community center for mission in many different ways.

Background Information

The idea that resulted in the Kasese Better Living Center project was born in 1999 when Nathaniel Walemba, who was on furlough from an interunion service in Kenya, observed to Kisembo John Black, the local church pastor, about the need for a place where people who did not speak Lukonzo, the local language, could worship. The pastor agreed that Kasese municipality was cosmopolitan, being home to many of the 65 ethnic groups¹ in Uganda. He noted that there were other people who lived in Kasese who were not Ugandans² and who did not understand and speak the local language, such as Mrs. Nandi Mattte. While she never missed church because of the language barrier, Pastor Black acknowledged that there might be others who were not as strong in faith who might be kept away because of the language used in church. Consequently, he agreed that it was necessary to ensure that people had an opportunity to worship in the language they understood.

After the pastor agreed to the idea of starting an English-speaking branch Sabbath school, he took the idea to the local church board for approval. The church board endorsed the proposal, and a decision was made that the branch could start in a rented place, preferably in the center of town. But finding a suitable yet affordable room

was not easy. Fortunately, a good number of church members, especially the youth, welcomed the idea and promised to find a place and contribute to the monthly rental charge. Though it was not easy, they remained steadfast, knowing that with God, all things are possible.³

Even though the church pastor was excited about the whole concept, John Kule, the field president, was not sure about how the whole idea would be perceived, and his fears were almost confirmed when some church members showed mixed feelings about starting a church for people who did not speak the local language. They looked at it as encouraging pride and superiority. They felt that those who did not know the local language should learn it. Nevertheless, the group behind the idea was determined to establish an English-speaking church. Their dream was fulfilled when an English-speaking congregation was started on September 1, 2001, in Club Dundee, which was rented for 20,000 Uganda shillings (US\$; equivalent to US\$10.00 then) every time it was used.⁴ Nathaniel Walembe preached the first sermon to 85 worshippers. The 20 English Adventist hymn books that were used on that first day were donated by Mr. and Mrs. Nguru Bradford. The couple also donated the public address system that was used. Kibaya Uzziah donated a lectern, which is still in use today, while Moses Kibairwandi donated six wooden office chairs, which are still in use today as well.⁵

The Challenge of Using Club Dundee for Worship

Club Dundee was used for all sorts of activities, including some meetings by the Pentecostal church, drinking by some merrymakers, and entertainment once in a while. So those who were opposed to the idea took advantage of that scenario and conducted a silent crusade against the whole idea, but the group that worshipped there remained steadfast. However, the talk of disapproval forced them to work hard to get a place of their own. With determination, they started looking for land. Several options emerged outside the town center, but they did not consider them because they had made up their minds to get a place right in the center of the town. Their efforts bore fruit when they located three plots in the current location and bought them one by one, with the last one having been paid for in full on September 20, 2004,⁶ without any assistance from the mother church or the local field. There was a small building on the second plot to be bought, and even though it was too small for the members, they decided to move from the club into the small structure. However, in 2005, Rift Valley Academy, which later became Rift Valley Secondary School, was founded on Mukirane Road within the town. The proprietors of Rift Valley Academy (Nathaniel M. Walembe, Tom Mugisa and others), being among the people who were behind the project, invited the church members to move into a hall in the school because it was bigger than the small building on the church land. So they moved to the school and did not return to the church land until the school was relocated to Butsumba village in 2009.⁷

Commencement of the Construction

With a piece of land in possession of the church, Tom Mugisa, who hails from the area and has supported the idea right from the beginning, approached Matoya Muroria, an Adventist architect in Kampala. Mugisa asked Muroria to draw an architectural plan of the church structure, which he agreed to do. In 2004 the plan was completed at no cost to the members.⁸ However, construction did not start until October 26, 2006.⁹ To pay for construction costs, a fundraising drive was started in 2005. It was presided over by Masereka Mutiba, and it raised USh600,000.00 (US\$330.00 then). The following year, Monday Bihanikire presided over the second fundraising event, at which close to USh1,000,000.00 (about US\$550.00 then) were raised. The third fundraiser was presided over by Chrispus Kiyonga, who was a Uganda government cabinet minister then, and it raised USh1,700,000 (US\$940.00 at that time).¹⁰ With the money they had raised, members decided to commence construction using the architectural plans drawn by Matoya. The small building on the property, which had been used for worship for some time, was demolished, and on October 26, 2006, construction commenced, with Machi Muranga as the builder. Since there was little money, much of what he did was at no cost to the church. After some time, Byasaki Bwambale took over the construction from him until the dream became bigger than he could handle.

In January 2009, after the small structure was demolished and while the construction going on, the school where members were worshipping moved to a new place outside the town center. As a result, the church members needed to find another place where they could worship. They decided to worship at their site using rented tents. This went on until the slab over the children's chapel site was complete and the people started using it for worship services.

The Idea of a Center of Influence

As construction progressed, the General Conference (GC) initiative for centers of influence¹¹ took center stage in the East-Central Africa Division (ECD). At the same time, the division came up with the "Image Change" initiative.¹² Nathaniel Walembe, whose idea it was to have an English-speaking congregation in Kasese town, was at the time the division executive secretary. Since the GC Centers of Influence initiative and ECD Image Change concept both had evangelism as their main goal, the division executive secretary who had been assigned the responsibility of ensuring the success of both initiatives encouraged the congregation to consider aligning their project with the objectives of the Center of Influence initiative. The members accepted the idea. Thus a bigger dream was born. While the GC initiative did not necessarily call for a big structure, the Image Change concept did, so the two ideas were combined, one focusing on services, the other focusing on the positive impression a good structure would make to the community for the good of mission.

The Field Takes Over the Project

With the project taking on new dimensions, the local church realized that it was becoming bigger than they could handle. So the members decided to ask the field to take over the project. Accordingly, in 2011 the local church handed over the project to the field.¹³

With the big picture in mind, two things happened. The first was to halt construction to evaluate what had been done to determine whether it met the requirements for the bigger building. The second thing was to have drawings of the new concept. At this time, Eldridge Masereka Walemba, an architect, was asked to make new architectural plans to reflect the new thinking. Eldridge drew the plans gratis, and in 2012, they were approved by the relevant church and government authorities. After the approval of the new plans, Nathaniel Walemba sent Stephen Mwangi,¹⁴ an engineer of Stemmer Hardware and Construction Building and Civil Engineering Contractors, Nairobi, to Kasese for the purpose of determining whether the foundation could support the envisaged new structure. Mwangi arrived in Kasese and evaluated the work that had been done to date. He made some recommendations for adjustments to accommodate the new vision. The field leaders then decided that Mwangi, who had identified what needed to be corrected, should be the one to supervise the corrections. Thus, he was contracted to oversee the phase that would make the corrections and perhaps continue if the terms of engagement were acceptable to both parties. However, after he finished the adjustments, it was not possible for him to continue, so a new builder from Kigali, Rwanda, Epimaque Ngoboka, was identified and contracted.¹⁵

The field taking over the project gave all church members throughout the field as well as well-wishers an opportunity to contribute to the construction of the project. Church members were encouraged to make monthly contributions using the tithe and offering envelopes. However, even with the participation of every member, funding the project continued to be a challenge. The monthly contributions were very small because the members are poor, and not many of them have steady incomes. The majority are peasant farmers who depend on unpredictable rain for their crops. Consequently, on March 18, 2012, a fundraising event dubbed “Donors Conference” was organized and conducted, with Chrispus Kiyonga, who was Uganda’s minister of defense at that time, as the chief guest.¹⁶ The officers of the division, Blasius Ruguri (president), Nathaniel Walemba (executive secretary), and Jerome Habimana (treasurer), attended the function, and Ruguri delivered the fundraising address. Over 300 million Ugandan shillings (US\$100,000) were raised.¹⁷ But it was still not adequate to complete the superstructure. It therefore became necessary to organize another fundraising event, the fifth one, this time with the head of state as the chief guest. The function was conducted in February 2017, and with the head of state’s contribution of USh200,000,000, the event raised USh340,000,000 (US\$100,000),¹⁸ which has assisted in the completion of the superstructure. Another fund drive is needed to complete the construction, though some of it is already done to facilitate the services that are already offered in the facility.

The Goal of the Center

Kasese Better Living Center of Influence is intended to initiate and implement different interventions with the goal of helping to improve the conditions of the community. This goal is enhanced by the emphasis of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on centers of influence (Life Hope Centers). The goal of these centers is to fulfill the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church through places where the needs of the people can be met, with the hope that after their needs have been met, they can follow the Master when they are invited to do so. Mrs. White wrote, "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"¹⁹ To this end, the center will be used for several purposes:

Run FM radio and TV broadcasts, which will provide life-changing messages through preaching, drama, and music.

Conduct seminars that promote peaceful conflict resolution for families and communities.²⁰

Conduct vegetarian cooking classes and seminars on nutrition.

Operate an information center with a public library and internet café.

Provide a place for workshops and seminars by local NGOs, government departments, and church programs.

Conduct classes to assist students who need tutoring in order to improve their performance in school.

Conduct adult literacy classes to increase the rate of literacy, which is very low.

Host a music recording studio in order to improve and develop the talent of singing that is apparent in the area.

Operate a health and physical fitness center equipped with all necessary equipment.

Operate a vegetarian restaurant.

Run an Adventist Book Center.

Provide accommodation for people who prefer staying in an alcohol-free environment.

Provide facilities for wedding receptions at which no alcohol is served.

Construction Status and Cost of the Project

At the time of writing this article, the superstructure is complete. An FM radio station and a music recording studio are operational. Administrative offices, a children's chapel, and a sanctuary are already in place. To date, over 4 billion Ugandan shillings (US\$1,100,000) have been spent on the project.²¹ It is estimated that by the time the project is complete, it will have cost over 6 billion Ugandan shillings (US\$1,600,000). While the project is majorly funded by church members in Rwenzori Field, at the fundraising initiatives described earlier, many people of good will from the general public, including political, civic, and religious leaders and business people, have all contributed generously. Among these, the leading contributor has been His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Uganda, General Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who to date has contributed 300 million Ugandan shillings (US\$80,000).²² Second to him is the East-Central Africa Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, with 224 million Ugandan shillings (US\$59,733).²³ The rest of the money came and continues to come from individual church members.

Kasese Better Living Center's Impact on the Community

For the purpose of this article, the community is divided into two groups: Adventist and non-Adventist. To the Adventist community, the center has been an eye-opener in several ways. It has proved that unity is strength. When people are united, they can do great things even when their income is low, as is the case in Rwenzori Field. To the local, the project is not cheap, yet church members have been able to get it to the level where every person who cares to appreciate it can do so. It has also shown that it is not the destiny of the Adventist Church to be associated with the small things for which the church has been known for a long time. The center has also shown the power of a dream. Many of those who initially opposed the idea are now among its strongest supporters. The center has energized the Adventist community and inspired many congregations. The idea of "image change" for the Church has taken root in the whole field. Members now know that with God, all things are possible. They take pride in what they have done, and to some, it is a nurturing lesson. Currently, church members are doing many projects at the local church level that are significant in size and quality. The Better Living Center's impact on the church members has been overwhelming, to say the least.

To the non-Adventist community, the Better Living Center project has "redeemed" the Adventists. When the land on which the project sits was sold to the Adventists, people made statements to the effect that the town council had wasted prime land by selling it to a church of poor people who would never develop it, yet it is right next to the town council offices. Until the project came up, the community thought that Adventists could not do anything meaningful. Even at the beginning, when they saw the size of the building, they scoffed at the members that they could never build such a facility. This is because the church was associated with small church buildings that are sometimes uncompleted. Thus, the project has earned respect for the Adventists. It has changed the community's perception of the Church. It has also shown the community that Adventists are good stewards of the little they get. People are amazed to see how so little can do so much. But most importantly, the

project has brought the non-Adventist community close to the Adventists. They have fully participated in the fundraising events that have taken place. They have attended meetings at which the church leaders such as Ted Wilson, General Conference president, and Blasius Ruguri, East-Central Africa Division president, have been the guests. The civic and political leaders fully identify themselves with the project like it is their own. It is indeed a center of influence because it has positively influenced many people about the Church. What the church needs to do now is to provide services, which are the most important part of the project.

People Associated with the Project

Field presidents: John Kule, Daniel Matte, and Ezekiel Mutwanga, the current field president.

Front line pastors: From the beginning of the project to date, the following pastors have been involved in the development of the project as church district leaders: Kitembo John Black, Ezekiel Mutwanga, Herizon Kalenzi, James Sasu, Kitembo Elisha Omwanze, Nahson Magezi, and Robert Bwambale, the current pastor.

Founding members: It is possible that some people may not be remembered because they were many, but some of those who were instrumental in the formation of the Kasese English church, which later became Kasese Better Living Center, include the following: Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Kitembo John Black, Nandi Matte, Yolesi and David Nguru Bradford, Mr. and Mrs. Kimulya Adorable, Tryphena Nziramba, Mr. and Mrs. Uziah Kibaya, Johnson Muthahinga, Mary Kagoda, Moses Kibaliwandu, Joel Nzyabake, Ndagire Justine, Kasereka Muranga, Mutabazi Lillian, Muhindo Jackson, Bwambale Sele Byasaki, Fenehasi Mwanguhya, Mr. and Mrs. Kalani Mordecai, Mrs. Goreti and Tom Mugisa, Byasaki Bwambale, and many others.

SOURCES

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White, Ellen G. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

NOTES

1. The Constitution of Uganda, 1995, 212-213.

2. "Kasese District," *National Population and Housing Census 2014*, accessed July 11, 2018, <https://www.ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/Kasese.pdf>.
3. Kiseembo Black, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Rwenzori Field headquarters, February 15, 2017. Pastor Black was the pastor at the time the project was initiated.
4. Tryphena Nziramba, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Kasese Better Living Center, March 21, 2017. Tryphena was the treasurer at the beginning of the project.
5. David Bradford Nguru, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Kasese Better Living Center, March 21, 2017. David was one of the leaders of the group that was behind the project.
6. General receipt of Kasese Town Council, dated September 20, 2004.
7. Author's personal knowledge as one of the proprietors of the school and one of the prime movers of the idea of starting an English church who made this decision to support the English church initiative.
8. Tom Mugisa, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Kasese Better Living Center, May 18, 2019.
9. Ibid.
10. M. J. Godwin Bihanikire, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Kasese Better Living Center, March 21, 2018. Mr. Bihanikire was the chairman of the building committee.
11. "About," Global Mission: Urban Centers of Influence, accessed March 24, 2018, <https://urbancenters.org/about/>.
12. Image change was a slogan the division used to encourage and inspire church members in the division to rally behind the division leaders to change the spiritual as well as the physical reputation of the church. Many of our churches were not good looking. They were small and poorly built. Our schools were not representative of what we believe as a church. The behavior of some of our church members was wanting. We wanted all this to change.
13. Kimulya Adorable, interview by Kimulya, Kasese Better Living Center, March 21, 2017.
14. The engineer Stephen Mwangi was building for ECD, so we already knew his ability and the quality of his work. We sent him to Kasese to assess whether the building was strong enough to carry the envisaged floors that were going to be added.
15. Ezekiel Mutwanga, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Rwenzori Field Office, November 20, 2016. Pastor Mutwanga is the field president.

16. The author was present, and one of the cows that were given for the event was bought by the chief guest. He gave it to the author, saying it was in appreciation for “your development initiatives.”
17. Yosia Baluku, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Rwenzori Field Office, May 15, 2018. Yosia Baluku is the treasurer of the field.
18. The author was there in person.
19. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association), 143.
20. Kasese district is prone to conflict. It is necessary to have a place where people can be taught how to deal with conflicts.
21. Yosia Baluku, interview by Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, Rwenzori Field office, May 15, 2018.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

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