Kilel, Mary Cherotich (1950–1990)

GODFREY K. SANG

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Mary Kilel was a Kenyan missionary nurse to Uganda, a lay evangelist, and a leader of the youth movement in Nandi in Western Kenya.
Early Life

Mary Cherotich was born a second-generation Adventist to Bornes and Stephen Biomdo of Kebeneti in Kericho in Western Kenya on October 6, 1950. She was their eighth child and the second daughter in a family of 18 children of the same parents. Her father, Stephen Biomdo, was the first Kipsigis Seventh-day Adventist and, on his land, he founded the first church in 1939, the following year a school, and in later years a dispensary. Mary began her early education at Kebeneti Adventist School founded by her father, and there she displayed good academic promise. She was quite active in the church, joining the Junior Missionary Volunteers program. Deeply interested in spiritual matters, she read through the entire Bible three times by the time she was 16.

She also had a keen interest in Adventist literature, reading *The Great Controversy* and other books in the Conflict of the Ages series while in her teens. She also showed great interest in the medical work at Kebeneti and was often the first to arrive at the dispensary on the day the missionary doctors from Kendu Adventist Hospital came. She helped organize the medical records, translating the symptoms of the patients to the European doctors and describing the prescriptions to the patients. Dr. E. C. Kraft, one of the visiting doctors from Kendu, noticed her deep interest in the medical work and asked her if she would like to be a nurse. She readily agreed and convinced her father that this was what she wanted.

Becoming a Nurse

She sat for the Kenya African Preliminary Examination in 1964 and passed with good scores. After her finals, she lacked the fees to proceed to secondary school and, on the recommendation of Dr. Kraft, she was admitted to the Kendu Mission School of Midwifery. To Stephen, this was the culmination of his two decades' worth of effort to establish the influence of the Adventist church in his area. At Kendu she joined the Missionary Volunteer program, eventually becoming a Master Guide. She desired to become a medical missionary after her training. It was at Kendu that Mary submitted a story to the book series *Storytime in Africa*, and it appears as the first story in volume 5 entitled, *Anywhere with Jesus*, under the name Mary Cherotich Stephen. Mary excelled in her studies at Kendu and graduated in Midwifery in 1968. At the start of 1969, at just 18, she was sent to work for the Adventist church in Uganda as a medical missionary.

Serving as a Missionary Nurse

Mary began working at Ishaka Mission Hospital in Bushenyi, Mbarara, in southern Uganda. She worked there until February 1971, when Ugandan President Milton Obote was ousted by Idi Amin, forcing Kenyans to flee from Uganda. She returned to Kenya and worked briefly in Kisumu before moving to Ndanai Health Centre at the border of the Kipsigis and Maasai part of the country. Afterwards she joined the New Nyanza General Hospital where she took additional training in nursing. It was here that she met her future husband, Andrew Kilel, a teacher. He had relocated with his parents from Cheptuiyet, near Kebeneti, to live in Kipsiorori village, Kaptumo in Nandi county. They were married in October 1972 at Chepterit in Nandi. She then found a job at the Kipsigis Girls High School where she worked as the nursing matron beginning in 1973.

Moving to Nandi

Early in 1976, after the birth of her son, she transferred to Mosoriot Teachers’ College in Nandi, halfway between Eldoret and Kapsabet. Her duties included running the college dispensary and handling the medical emergencies of the students and staff. When she arrived at Mosoriot, she discovered that there was no church at the college, and the nearest ones were the Kapkonjusmoo and Lelboinet churches which were some of the earliest churches established from the Kaigat Dispersal of 1941. These were some miles away from the institution and, with a young family, it was sometimes difficult to get there. She soon discovered that there were some Adventist students attending the college and so she chose to establish a company in the government-run college.

The college principal, Johnson Waiganjo, was a well-meaning person and did not stop her from organizing the group. In fact, he encouraged her to proceed despite the fact that the institution had been established by various Protestant denominations who came together for the purpose. The new company started in a small room adjacent to the college chapel, and in no time the room was full as more students discovered the young fellowship. They now moved to the larger chapel where they continued to hold regular services. Many non-Adventist students attended and some eventually joined the church.

Soon a good number of Adventists in the Mosoriot community also chose to worship at the college. She occasionally visited the outlying churches, particularly when the students were out of school. She soon instituted the Friday vesper services to commence the Sabbath and also a midweek service every Wednesday. These were held in a classroom or in a special room. Mary organized regular services at the college chapel through the school calendar. There would normally be 50 to 80 students attending services each Sabbath. A number of staff members also joined the congregation, as did people from the community. Just a year after organizing at Mosoriot, Mary learned of the newly established University of Eastern Africa Baraton. She quickly connected with the new institution and got Mosoriot to be a part of their outreach circuit. Many students and staff of Baraton came to Mosoriot under the outreach program.
Working with the Youth-led Evangelism in Nandi

Beginning in 1980, Mary embarked on an intensive evangelism program mainly targeting the youth. She helped organize and financially support many youth-led crusades throughout Nandi. At her suggestion, the youth leaders agreed to bring to Mosoriot College the youth seminars meant to sharpen the leadership and evangelism skills of young people. She also invited local and even international speakers to mentor the youth. She was lucky that Baraton just ten miles away had a large pool of powerful speakers, mainly pastors in training and their faculty who readily went to Mosoriot.

She hosted two of the largest youth seminars in Mosoriot in 1981 and 1982, where some of the youth leaders from the General Conference such as Pastor Kenneth L. Bushnell were in attendance. One of the speakers included Robert J. Wieland of the East Africa Mission. There was also Pastor E. H. Sequeira, who at that time was the chaplain for the universities and colleges in Kenya. Mary organized accommodation and food for the nearly 1,500 young people who trooped into Mosoriot on each of the occasions. She also hosted youth seminars in 1983 and 1984, with each successive one being larger than the one before. Soon the seminars were converted into youth retreats with college-level young people being invited to attend from as far away as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. Mary made maximum use of the large resource pool at Baraton, identifying speakers on various subjects and training youth to become literature evangelists. During these seminars, many books were sold and she purchased a good number of them. As an avid reader of Adventist literature, she soon created an impressive library, complete with Adventist journals and magazines. She began creating Audiobooks, reading out loud passages from her favorite Ellen G White literature and recording them on cassettes which she distributed for free.

Connecting with the University of Eastern Africa Baraton

As part of the Baraton outreach circuit, many fine student evangelists and pastors from many lands came there to minister on Friday evenings and on Sabbath mornings and afternoons. Four or five students or faculty would normally be hosted for lunch each Sabbath at Mary’s home. Together with students and faculty at Baraton, Mary organized many crusades and evangelistic efforts that took them to different places in Nandi Kericho, Uasin Gishu, and beyond. During the 1,000 Days of Reaping program which commenced on September 18, 1982, and lasted through June 15, 1985, Mary intensified her efforts and oversaw the coming of many new members into the Adventist church and the planting of numerous churches, mainly in northern Nandi. She also organized guest speakers for many camp meetings in local churches, taking advantage of the international environment at Baraton. Ethiopian preacher Daniel Lefebo; Ugandans Paul Mukasa, Charles Mugisa, and Chris Katana Adyeri; Zambian Daniel Phiri; and numerous students from Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and west and southern African nations preached at remote churches in evangelism campaigns in many places all over western Kenya. She personally drove many of them to the churches, ensured their welfare while there, and then dropped them back at Baraton at her own expense.

Later Life and Death

In 1986 her husband, Andrew Kilel, was involved in a near fatal road accident, and he was hospitalized for lengthy periods, requiring her to limit her time in evangelism to care for him. Mary was forced to relocate from the college to care for her husband and now lived mostly in her rural home in Kaptumo. Mary continued as the sponsor of the Adventist group in Mosoriot. On September 2, 1990, she died from complications of childbirth. She was 39. She was laid to rest at her Kabokwa home in Kaptumo in an emotional funeral that was attended by many thousands who knew her. Pastor Joseph Rono, then the executive director of the Western Kenya Field, presided over her funeral service. She was survived by her husband Andrew, four of her children, Godfrey, Carol Chepkurui, and Edward Kiprono, and newborn Mercy. Baby Mercy died a month later.

Source


NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, the information in this article is based on Godfrey K. Sang, Kili, and K. Hosea, On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya (Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017), 145-150.

