

A Miracle at Woodmont

The coup erupted in Baraka, the home of Memba Mwene, in 1996. Anti-government forces were fighting Democratic Republic of Congo soldiers. Mwene and his family often could hear gunfire and even saw fighting.

“I saw the fighting. ... It was terrible. ... A lot of people, friends of mine, they died.” He added that residents were not permitted to be armed.

The family stayed inside the home on their plantation and started sleeping on the floor to avoid flying bullets from fighting nearby.



For five days the conflict continued. Finally without any other preparation such as withdrawing funds from the bank, he and Elizabeth; their two children, Uwezo, 7, and Jeanine, 4; Elizabeth’s mother, Kabwe Chanja; and Elizabeth’s sister, Esther Memba; ran to the boats on Lake Tanganyika, begging for help to escape. They didn’t have anything to pay the boat operators. Some people fleeing brought TVs, radios, and clothes as payment. Thankfully, a boat operator agreed to help those gathered. About 40 people including Mwene’s family crowded onto a boat.

Many refugees from the Congo, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, escaped the war via Lake Tanganyika to Kigoma, Tanzania. Then many were transported to the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp.

The Mwenes landed in Tanzania after a five-hour voyage, the farthest they had traveled on water, where government officials transported them to the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp. They eventually were joined by many other Congolese. The coup developed in 1998 into the Second Congo War also known as the African World War. Still continuing, tens of thousands Congolese have fled and 5.4 million have died,

some in the fighting, many from disease. It is the world’s deadliest conflict since World War II, according to Wikipedia.

The Mwenes didn’t know the big picture, but they knew in the refugee camp they were told to go into the bush to cut down trees so they could build a very small shelter.

“It was terrible there. We don’t have food; we don’t have money; we don’t have clothes, even water. ... We say, how are we going to live here? Because God is God, we live there.”



The Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in 2016.

Mwene’s family couldn’t leave the refugee camp. If they left, the Tanzanian government would put them in jail. “Everywhere there was a barrier. The soldiers were everywhere. ... It was like being in jail,” said Mwene.

They struggled mostly with hunger, often eating nothing on the last week of each month when food, delivered by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and other non-governmental agencies, ran out.

In the Congo, Mwene had been a farmer but also a teacher's assistant to his father, who was a preacher and leader of the Free Methodist Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and a missionary to Tanzania. Mwene had faced opposition as a preacher. Muslims had threatened to kill him if he didn't stop preaching on peace and Jesus Christ. He did not stop though he never traveled alone after that threat.

As time passed in Nyarugusa and Mwene had time to consider everything, he realized his faith wasn't shaken, he said.

"When I was staying in Nyarugusa, I can say God is good because he helped me to leave my country. I can appreciate Him, what He did to my life, where I was living because ... nobody in my family die ... and everybody was in good health. Every day we sing, we pray," he said.

He started a church in the camp, which grew from about 350 worshippers to about 1,000. He and other church members also called on the sick and others in the camp who had needs.

Eleven long years after arriving at the refugee camp, Mwene and his family received notice they had been designated as refugees and were chosen for resettlement to the United States.

The family arrived in Louisiana in 2007 and relocated to Colorado, trying to find their way. Then they moved to Nashville and in early 2012 Mwene, Elizabeth, and Kabwe "Jeanine" Chanja, visited Woodmont Baptist Church. Mwene said he passed the church on his way to work and felt God was leading him there.

They attended the Fulcher Sunday School class (now the Logos class) after which Nick and Connie Bushey escorted them to the worship service. Afterwards the Busheys introduced them to Carlos and Myrtice Owens, missionaries to Africa for 36 years for the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and members of Woodmont.

The Mwenes and Owens spoke to each other in Swahili.

The rest is history.

Mwene and his family discovered that the Owens not only spoke Swahili but had lived on the coast of Lake Tanganyika and were as near to being an African as a "mazungu" (ma-zoon-goo — white person in Swahili) could be. The Owens learned that Mwene wanted to preach the Gospel which they were glad to hear, though at that time they were not completely aware of the large contingent of Africans living in Nashville.

Soon Mwene was meeting with Carlos to learn how he could realize his calling to the ministry. Of course, Carlos had trained ministers in Africa so he was glad to mentor Mwene. A short time later Woodmont invited a small Swahili-speaking congregation, which



Much of life at the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Tanzania involves waiting for services.



The Owens family on the way to Kigoma, Tanzania, which is well-known to most members of the Swahili Baptist Church because most of them lived in refugee camps nearby.



Missionary Myrtice Owens, a registered nurse, treats a patient in Africa.

had been meeting for worship in Mwene's apartment, to use some of its facilities.

Mwene then realized that God was leading him to leave his beloved denomination and start a Baptist church.

Across the five years of the existence of the Swahili Baptist Church of Woodmont, the church has become active in the Southern Baptist Convention so it could support missions work and was supported by it financially.

Currently, Mwene asks for prayer for his growing congregation which draws about 140 people.

Besides continually helping members adjust to the United States and find ways to take advantage of the amazing opportunity to live in the U.S., the Swahili Baptist Church is building a Baptist church building in Baraka for one of many Baptist congregations Mwene has started while conducting missions work there. The Swahili Church has contributed about \$13,900 to the construction



Missionary Carlos Owens baptizes a woman in Africa.



This new Baptist congregation, the Baraka Baptist Church, was started by Mwene.

of Baraka Baptist Church and Woodmont Baptist has contributed about \$5,000.

The walls are completed, a ring beam is up, and the next step is a roof. Then the members will begin meeting in it, though it will still need windows.

The Owenses are very supportive of the construction of the church building in the DRD as well as the other efforts of the Swahili Baptist Church. Concerning the construction in the DRD, they explained that people in third world countries receive more from gathering to worship than Americans can ever grasp. The building is large to accommodate meetings of area Baptist churches started by Mwene, they added.

Though the couple is not able to attend services of Swahili Baptist because of their health, the Owenses still support the congregation financially, with advice, and with their prayers.

Among its laudatory accomplishments, the Swahili Baptist Church is glad to report the ordination of a woman who is a former Muslim as a deacon. Another member of the church is a former Muslim. The church also called Joseph Matata to serve as chief deacon several years ago. Matata, a former Baptist pastor in Kigoma, Tanzania, who ministered in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, is a recent graduate of Illinois Baptist College, earning his bachelor's degree of theology. He and his wife, Catherine, work as custodians at Woodmont.



The Baraka Baptist Church is being built with funds from the Swahili Baptist Church and Woodmont Baptist Church, Nashville.



Rev. Carlos Owens and Myrtice Owens, missionaries emeritus of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, visit with Pastor Memba Mwene several years ago.

Since starting the Swahili Baptist Church at Woodmont, Mwene said he and the other members of the church see the acts of Woodmont, which show the faith and love of Woodmont members. “We walk together with Woodmont,” stated the pastor.

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