A Kenyan testimony to God's faithfulness

Rebecca Osiro

The voting had gone well on December 27, 2007, and the populace awaited the results, which began to be broadcast by midnight. One party led by a wide margin, and the victory of one presidential candidate seemed imminent. The atmosphere in Kenya was tense but calm.

Two days later, everything had changed. The media aired contradictory statements about the outcome of the presidential election. The social fabric was fraying as violence between ethnic groups erupted.

A cry that gave Tausi away

Tausi left for her place of work on Saturday morning, December 29. The solemn gestures of those she met on her way to the nearest bus stage seemed to spell doom. She made it to the bus terminus, and the availability of public transportation encouraged her to move ahead, despite the fact that few vehicles were on the road.

No sooner had she left the terminus than all hell broke loose around her. "*Ma yooo!*" (Oh my!) she wailed, and her cry revealed her ethnic identity: she belonged to "the other"! Thrown from the moving vehicle, she scarcely managed to escape injury. She tried to take cover in the nearest government institution, but the watchman would not let her in: she could not speak the language that was politically correct in that area. She found herself on a road that traversed thickets, with vehicles hooting and speeding toward her. People were running for safety, but she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help.

She had reached her mother by phone, but noise at both ends of the line prevented them from communicating. Her mother and brother set out from home, braving crowds of rowdy youth armed with crude weapons and chanting war cries. Her brother was

particularly at risk of dying—by machete, by stoning, or by lynching.

After more than an hour, the three were reunited, and they turned toward home, but in order to avoid the mobs, they had to trek for hours on paths that meandered through the brush. Back home at long last, they began to observe strange people walking into their compound in threes or fours, making inquiries in their dialect and glaring at Tausi's apartment. After the third group left, a neighbour sneaked over to inform them that they were in danger. The men had marked their house as one whose inhabitants were from the other community—the enemy.

Tausi's family decided to leave home and sought refuge in a slum area. That very night, the groups revisited the apartment with the aim of attacking. Was it just lucky that the family had left home, or was their escape a miracle from God?

Tausi's family decided to leave. With no particular destination in mind, they eventually found themselves in a slum area where they sought refuge. That very night, the three groups revisited the apartment with the aim of attacking. Was it just lucky that the family had left home, or was their escape a miracle from God?

Four days later, Tausi and members of her family braved the tensions and were able to take some other households with them. The biggest challenge was transportation. Although most of the area's inhabitants are Christians, no one was willing to help people from the other ethnic community. When the group managed to secure a vehicle, the driver objected to the intended destination on the other side of the city, because most its residents are of Somali origin and share the party affiliation of Tausi's tribesmen and women.

The driver feared for his life. He took roundabout routes to avoid attack on the way. His own people would attack him if they realised he was assisting an enemy to safety. As he had anticipated, the Somalis inquired of the people being driven into their residential area: "*Jaluo*?" ("A Luo?"), and Tausi's mother nodded. They responded with welcoming words and gestures of sympathy as the vehicle traversed the narrow streets into the church compound. A predominantly Muslim community sympathised with and welcomed Christians who had been forced to leave a predominantly Christian area.

Mission in Kenyan context

In this context, mission work becomes complex, because both ethnicity and religious affiliation play a role in the troubles.

In 634–644 AD, during the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the Islamic or Arabic rule of tolerance was established. Umar created a *dhimmi* status system[1] of clients and protectors, replacing the system of slaves and masters of the Byzantine and Persian empires.[2] Some Christians even welcomed Islamic rule as liberation from the tyranny of their fellow Christians.[3] For example, in 635 AD, pious Christian and governor in Damascus Mansur bin Sargun, grandfather to John of Damascus, was instrumental in the capitulation of Damascus to Muslim troops under Khalid ibn al-Walid. Was history about to repeat itself in the case of Tausi's family, in tolerance shown by Somali Muslims even as Christians refused help to other Christians?

In the seventh century, some Christians welcomed Islamic rule as liberation from the tyranny of fellow Christians. Was history about to repeat itself in tolerance shown by Muslims even as Christians refused help to other Christians?

Although the Christian Sarguns continued to hold political positions under Muslim rule, they were gradually relegated to political oblivion, and the Christian community was subjugated. By the third generation, the fury of John of Damascus against Islam is evident in his writings,[4] and the Christian community held his family responsible for betrayal—as is apparent in the iconoclastic debates of the time. Mansur bin Sargun had welcomed Islamic troops in his endeavour to deliver his people from oppressive Byzantine rule, but the unexpected had happened!

A sense of safety mixed with fear of the unexpected lingered in the minds of members of Tausi's family, because they knew the history of the spread of Islam. It did not occur to them that eight months later, one of them—Tausi's mother—would be ordained and assigned pastoral duties in that area.

Ordination

For the first time, the church planned to ordain a woman as pastor, and a crisis was anticipated. Brothers and sisters offered prayer support within and without, but things remained unclear.

Proponents of Tausi's mother's ordination found some leeway in the church constitution's silence on the subject of women's ordination, in biblical texts that mention women in ministry, and in contemporary approaches to ministry that are inclusive of both genders. Opponents pointed to the pronoun *he* used with the noun *pastor*. This controversy might have sparked endless theological debate, as God is Spirit, yet the pronoun *he* is often appended to the word *God*. And the words *he* and *man* are also used for humanity in gender-inclusive forms in texts such as Genesis 3:21–24.

The ordination took place despite divergent voices and last-minute consultations among church leaders that delayed the start of the service. The service was lively: Proponents of women's ordination gestured in approval and satisfaction. Warm melody from choirs filled the air, relevant texts were read and a sermon delivered. After vows of commitment in the ministry were read, laying on of hands took place. Tausi's mother was ordained along with three male ministers, and her turn provoked not only cheers of joy from the congregation but also ululation from women. It was not just her ordination but also women's ordination—a breakthrough.

The church feels a burden to reach out with a reconciling message of peace to displaced people of various ethnic groups living in a neighboring slum area. Orthodoxy without orthopraxis may not yield much here; believers must close the credibility gap between words and deeds.

Throughout the country, Kenya Mennonite Church women were keen on the ordination. After Sunday service on August 31, 2008, women sat in small groups with their cell phones on in order to hear the ordination exercise taking place hundreds of miles away. They were monitoring the process in collaboration with their counterparts who were not only witnessing the exercise but also bore the cost of transmitting it to their colleagues who could not be there in person.

Eleven months have past since her ordination, and after eight months in ministry, she seeks to guide the faithful to reestablish and rejuvenate themselves in their faith. The main social challenge is high unemployment among church members and finding means by which the community's low-income entrepreneurship, now lacking capital, can be revamped. Living in a predominantly

Muslim area, church members struggle to keep their faith. Secularism, pluralism, religious fanaticism, materialism, and ethnocentricism also threaten to undermine their convictions.

In her ministry, she also grapples with a vision to reach out to the unreached. Displaced people from different ethnic communities have moved into the neighbouring residential slum area, and the church feels a burden to reach out to them with a reconciling message of peace and harmony. Orthodoxy without orthopraxis may not yield much here; as James 2:14–25 notes, believers must close the credibility gap between words and deeds.

If Tausi's family has faced rejection by other Christians because of their ethnicity, and her mother has been rejected by a faction of the church because of gender and other issues, how would people from another faith who have rejected or denied Christ's divine power receive or listen to her? But she soldiers on, believing that the Lord's chosen ally will carry out God's purpose. Her testimony is that God has spoken and called her and will see that her mission prospers.[5]

Notes

[1] Dhimmi status was the protection given to non-Muslim "people of the covenant or obligation" in an Islamic territory. Clients or protected people included Christians and Jews (H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* [New York: Cornell University Press, 1953], 75–76).
[2] K. Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 10th ed. (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), 178.
[3] John Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 311.
[4] Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).
[5] Isaiah 48:14–15, paraphrased.

About the author

Rebecca Osiro is a Kenyan pastor and theologian. She is working with two churches in the area to which she and her family relocated after the recent violence and is also writing her doctoral dissertation in Islam-Christian relations. In addition to her church and family responsibilities, she initiated and is now managing a microfinance program.