

Interview with Bishop Ochola

by Travis Rejman



Introduction

Hello and welcome to the Goldin Institute Online's discussion with the Bishop Ochola, the retired Anglican bishop of diocese Kitgum in northern Uganda. The Goldin Institute Online will offer participants a chance to hear first hand the experience and insights from grassroots leaders from around the world who are a part of the partner cities network.

Bishop Ochola is a leading voice in the efforts to save young people from being abducted into armed conflict, to reintegrate these children who have escaped from militias and who is working tirelessly to broker a peace agreement between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Uganda. In preparation for the upcoming Goldin Institute meeting being planned for the fall of 2007 in Columbia on the topic of the youth and violence with a focus on the reintegration of child soldiers, I recently spoke with the Bishop Ochola about his work with the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative and about his personal experiences in working with child soldiers. I began our conversation by asking Bishop Ochola to share with us how he became involved in working with child soldiers in Uganda.

Interview

Bishop Ochola: Well mine is a long story. It is started way back when I became a priest in 1972, just after Amin came into power in '71. I came back from college in the midst of these problems that Amin had created by killing so many soldiers and many people in Kitgum at the time. So I was very much involved in burying the dead and sitting with the grieved families most of the time during my pastoral ministry in northern Uganda. Then from there, you know, I went to, we went into exile in Congo for three years and when we came back, you know the killing in Uganda never stop. So it continued up to today. So my real involvement with the child soldiers actually came about in 1990 when we went back to Gulu. And there were some child soldiers who were in the bush, who are left there, like the current leader of the LRA, Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, who was part of the child soldiers who were left as nonentity by those who made peace agreement, who signed peace agreement with the Ugandan Government in 1988. So they left them there.

So in 1990, when Betty Begombi was appointed the minister for pacification in the north, actually it is she instigated this dialogue with the LRA. So in the course of this, I was involved, I was asked to represent the church. So we used to go many times even during the night to meet with the rebels in the bush. And by 1994, at the beginning of 1994, we succeeded in persuading the LRA to come out of their rebellion. Most unfortunately when the president came to Uganda, to Northern Uganda in Gulu, he gave them a seven day ultimatum that if they don't come out within seven days, they would be

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flushed out from the bush. But the government never did that up to today. So we started having some soldiers coming back, actually after that one, I mean after the peace process was derailed and the LRA started doing three things.

One, killings throughout the villages. Ambushes on all the roads leading out of Gulu or Kitgum and Lira, and also abductions of innocent children. Those were the three things that the LRA started immediately just after three days of that announcement by the president. So, from 1994 to '99, so many soldiers, so many child soldiers actually, came back, either they were rescued by the government or they escaped and they came into our hands. We began to deal with a big number of children coming out. Sometimes they are officially released by the LRA leaders to come into our hands because we formed what we called the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative in 1997 when the LRA killed over 400 people in Kitgum. Yeah. So that is how I became actually involved in the child soldiers. And we have actually brought so many of them through our organization and sometimes they come through the World Vision International through the- or sometimes they are taken by the army-by the military.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you. Could you tell me, in your experience, what are the ages of the child soldiers you have been working with in Uganda and do you know how many are still fighting in the militias?*

Bishop Ochola: Well, the child soldiers are anything from uh, from seven or six years old to twelve. But now, those who have stayed longer in the bush, depends on how when you are abducted. Because abduction, real abduction actually started over children in 1994 in Kinyeti when the ultimatum was given to the LRA. Soldiers find that young children who have been abducted at the age of 7, and 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, if they stay in the bush for five years, you can add five years to this so you'll know but those who have stayed up to last year or up to now they are more than twenty now. Twenty years old in the bush! Because they have stayed long. But those who have come back, some came back after one year, after three months, after two months or sometimes after five years-you know, they still come out. In 1990--2004, the when we began to actually succeeded, in, you know, in persuading the government and the LRA to come to meet face to face in the jungle of northern Uganda. We were very grateful because the government had wanted to bring thousands and thousands of the children out of the rebellion. But also that was derailed because the government never actually wanted peace.

Travis Rejman: *Do you have a sense of how many children are still fighting or are still looking for a way to escape?*

Bishop Ochola: It is very difficult because I didn't go to Garama-I was still in North America. When I arrived there people were already on their way

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to Gruba and later to Garama so I could not-I cannot give you the precise number. But what I know is that over thirty thousand children have been abducted by the LRA. And they say that half of these have not been accounted for. So you can still say, if it is fifty thousand, that is twenty five are still with them. If it is more than that, then we still have many of them with them. And I believe that there are still very many, there are still very many children with the LRA.

Travis Rejman: *It sounds like several thousand children have found a way to leave the fighting. In your experience, has it been difficult for them find a way to leave or escape?*

Bishop Ochola: Oh, it is extremely difficult to leave because—you see—our work is actually to sensitize the community. We have what we call Peace Committee—all over at the grass roots, in the village sub-county, we have Peace Committee of nine people. So what we want actually is to help sensitize our people, so that when those people come they should be received by the community, because our culture is the culture of non-violence, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. So, this has helped the people to understand us relatively quickly because it is in their blood—they know it, it is their culture. But where, you see people do not understand, like children in school, for instance when child soldiers go to school, they are called, oh, you are hired gun's soldiers or the wife of the rebel, if she's a girl, you know they are still being stigmatized by the children. And even other people who do not understand our culture very well.

Travis Rejman: *I imagine that this sense of reconciliation and forgiveness that you are speaking of, while laudable, must be an extremely difficult proposition for many who have suffered at the hands of child soldiers. There have been many well documented cases of atrocities that these young people have been forced to commit. I understand that this is also an issue that has impacted your family directly and I'm hoping you would share a little bit of your experience and how that impacted your understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation.*

Bishop Ochola: I think there are two things here you are talking about. One is that the understanding of the circumstances that lead these children to be where they are in captivity. People should not really judge these children as criminal— as in a sense that they deliberately committed crimes against humanity. They have been forced. It is just like in western world here, if somebody kidnaps your child and forces that child to do something. You don't blame the child; you have to blame the kidnapper. So those people who have abducted children and forced them into sex slaves, into child soldiers or made them into instrument of death against their own people—those are the ones to be held responsible. So, for us, as religious leaders and the Acholi community, our understanding is completely different; that first and foremost that these children are the victims of circumstances. If they have killed us so much, we know that because of the part behind them that forced

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them to do that. That is our understanding. Which is different completely from other people understanding.

The second point that you have raised, of course, is that one of the victims of this war, my daughter was raped by the by the rebels in 1987, when we were here in North America. And she was gang-raped and after that terrible ordeal, she committed suicide immediately.

Travis Rejman: *I am so sorry.*

Bishop Ochola: In May, just four days before her nineteenth birth-date. So that was a terrible thing for us as a family. Ten years later, my wife went home and when she was coming back on Friday, like today in the morning, her vehicle, the vehicle she was traveling in hit the land mine and she was blown into pieces. She died instantly. That has been actually something that has been very, very difficult in my life and the life of my family.

Travis Rejman: *I'm very sorry.*

Bishop Ochola: Never the less, this tragic death actually has become a challenge, a very big challenge to me and that is why I have dedicated my whole life to work for peace so that other people may not lose their dear ones unnecessarily as we did. Yes.

Travis Rejman: *Bishop Ochola, thank you again for sharing that story with me and with our listeners. Although that's obviously a very painful story for me to hear personally, I very much appreciate your willingness to share that with us. As we've spoken about before, I think about you and your story all the time. Your story is one of the reasons why we want to make sure that this issue of child soldiers and the reintegration of child soldiers and the prevention of young people from joining militias is a topic we very much want to lift up. We know it is an issue around the world. And we look forward to working with you in addressing this issue with our partners and colleagues around the world. Could you share with us where your inspiration or your motivation comes from in tackling these issues despite the many adversities you faced?*

Bishop Ochola: Yes. There are two things. One is that I am coming from a culture of non-violence, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. And so that is my background where I am coming from and because of that it has been easier for me to understand when I became a priest, that the same -the same concept, the same understanding of forgiveness and justice is very clear in the Christian principle of reconciliation. The principle of reconciliation is that actually you have to become forgiving. So actually in our culture, this has been a great gift to our people because, in this, what we call mari-put, which is reconciliation in English, it simply means that truth telling is extremely important for accountability. And then, truth telling that means you are revealing what you have done and it is coming out of your own convictions, you are not forced to tell the world. So, you uh, actually

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witness against yourself but witness against what you have done. So that is very important for us. So, I find that in Christianity it is the same principle. It is biblical. It is Christian. So, it helps me to understand God very well when God forgives those who are crucifying Christ on the cross that Jesus Christ prays the prayer of peace-Father, forgive them for they do not know not what they're doing. And you know I have been helped to forgive those who have done all this to me, to my daughter, to my wife, and to my many parishioners who have been killed, even whose graves are not known to anybody. So it has helped me because our culture, or it's system of justice, is very restorative, it is healing, it is forgiving, and it is transforming.

That means that if you go through it, you emerge out there a new person, completely transformed, a new community, completely transformed because you have been forgiven, because you have been healed and because your broken relationship has been restored and because you have now become completely transformed. Yeah. So that helps me to become what I am today. Really, to forgive and to work for peace and to promote the culture of non-violence for all humanity.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you, Bishop. I understand the cultural and religious moorings that you're speaking of in terms of a societal commitment to truth telling and reconciliation. But for many, this prospect of reconciliation must be a very difficult proposition. Can you give us any insights into what kind of tools or techniques or processes that you have found are helpful in promoting this sense of reconciliation in the broader society?*

Bishop Ochola: Yes. You see, when the focus is on our suffering, it is just impossible to forgive because in truth telling-the truth reveals everything –in the open. And it is like a truth becomes actually like a - like as hot as fire? As it is as naked as electric wire, it is as deadly as anything, like a cobra that can kill instantly. So in order to receive what has been said, you know, there is only one way to do that one and that is the God way. The God way, and it is also the cultural way, our cultural way, is actually to bring in mercy. And that is what the world doesn't...has not yet come to understand.

So truth telling leads to mercy which is forgiveness and leads to justice which is doing a difference, bringing a difference. You see God, God is so wonderful, when you look at the story of Abel and his brother. When his brother killed Abel, you know he was trying to say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, God says you are your brother's keeper. But the world doesn't want to be their brother's, their sister's keeper. That is the problem. The way of the world and the way of God is completely at parallel here, you know, they don't go together. So if you've got God's way, if we get full of God's way, we can actually, you know, forgive. It is possible to forgive. Because we, if you stand you know the truth, with the world once it knows the truth, administers justice straight away, so that it destroy the whole thing. So in the understanding of the world about justice, is that you know that truth administers

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justice. But in our culture we don't do it like that. In god's way god does not do it like that. God needs the truth to be revealed. We need the truth to be revealed. The world also needs the truth to be revealed, which is good. But how to handle that truth when it has become naked, the world doesn't know but God knows and our culture also knows that we bring in mercy. And mercy is like oil that covers, that heals. So we can handle it.

We can accept it, you know, as part of our life. Because, like in my case, those people have killed my daughter, they have killed my wife. They will not bring, their deaths or whatever people do to them will not bring back the life of my wife, the life of my child. So the best thing is actually to save them from the problem of guilt by forgiving them. So that they can be set free from their guilt. And also, when I forgive them it also helps me to be set free from my anger, bitterness, and maybe, you know, the hovering spirit of revenge. You know, all this will go. Because I will also be set free. So in this way, the world can absolutely relate, to understand forgiveness in God's way, justice in God's way, peace in God's way, forgiveness in God's way, so in that way we can follow the steps of truth telling, mercy, justice, peace, the restoration of broken relationship and then complete transformation of the society involved in the conflict or the people involved in the conflict. That is the only way.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you Bishop. I do understand how your Christian identity and cultural moorings have helped to promote a commitment to truth telling and reconciliation for you and for many that you work with there in Uganda. In cities around the world who are going to be coming from a variety of religious or spiritual backgrounds and cultural back grounds and who are interested in partnering with other sectors of society, how to you engage the broader sectors of society in this kind of a movement?*

Bishop Ochola: You can only approach this one even through our commonality that is humanity. Even if those people don't believe in God, but they know that we are all human beings. Humanity is a universal. That is one. So our commonality as human beings—we need peace, we need coexistence, we need food, we need all these things. That is a common thing that we can begin from. And help those people that, you see, what are they fighting for? Why are they killing each other? We can find out and then help them to see things that can unite us together as humanity. And then we can lead from there, to see how we can actually coexist with one another. So in that way, if we bring out commonality, I don't think even the, I think the study it would reveal that all the people in the world, somehow, in some way, they are actually very, very religious. They might not know it, you see, but it is there in the lives of the people that somehow they relate to something beyond themselves. And that something beyond themselves- what we call god, not really like in Christianity that people know god through Christ, or the Muslims-- Islam, they know God through Mohammed. It is not like that but what we are saying here is that God has revealed himself — even just through nature,

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people know that there is something that actually brings us together — our need for food, for instance. Everybody eats. Nobody here doesn't eat in this world. So we can use our commonality to bring a solution to the problem.

***Travis Rejman:** Thank you, Bishop. As you know all too well, unfortunately, this issue of child soldiers and the reintegration of child soldiers is an issue that's impacting just too many of the cities that we both work with around the world. And I'm wondering if you might be able to share a little bit more about the unique history and development and dynamics of the conflict in northern Uganda. And then we can turn our attention a bit to how some of the lessons you've learned from that unique context might be applicable in other situations.*

Bishop Ochola: Yeah, fortunately, you know, I was born in Uganda, grew and had my education in Uganda. And I know my--our history right from the time, even from before the colonial era in Uganda. What I know for sure is that when the British came, you know, they gave what they brought to the people of the south, that is, economic and education, empire. When they reached north they had nothing, so they made the people there, to become in the military, in the police force, in the prison, and also a part of northern Uganda was labor-reserved to work in the sugar industry, tea industry in southern Uganda. So that started what we call the north-south divide. That the people, there's been economic imbalance and educational disparity at a national level. So you'll find the south has education and wealth, the north is poor, and without education. So that has been the problem, even by the time we got independence. Northern Uganda did not have education.

Those people who came from the north, like the first prime minister of Uganda, Dr. Milton Obote, his father was the brother of the chief under the British rule, so he was able, he was allowed to go even to the university, like Machare university. But other children were not allowed those privileges. It was a privilege to go to university, you know. It was not something that everybody was qualified to go, to do. So that is a problem that started. So you'll find, we were in the military and others, other people were sleeping in houses. We were standing outside guarding the British and even after independence we continued to do still doing that one. So we need to rectify all these problems of North-South divide, by actually accepting one another and resolve the problem. So that will be possible. So people can also learn, maybe if they looked into their historical background they may also discover what has been the problem, and if that problem is still continuing, like in northern Uganda, the problem is still continuing. And because the first leaders of our independence came, like Obote, came from the north. Amin, also, unfortunately, came from the north and so the people in the south felt, that, who have the best education and economic power, that they were deprived by the British, why should the north really rule Uganda? And because of that I think we can still correct that if we can actually put some corrective measures to this, to some of these problems of the past, so that we begin to

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build a healthy nation for all, in Uganda.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you for that, Bishop Ochola. I can see how each city and region is going to certainly need to understand the underlying history and dynamics of the conflict in order to have a chance to resolve it in their area. I'm curious, too, as we start to think about working with other cities around the world—in your experience in Uganda, what have been the most important tools or understandings or insights that you might be able to share about how to help reintegrate child soldiers back into society.*

Bishop Ochola: I think the most important is their acceptance by the community. And secondly, that they should be allowed to tell their stories. You know, forgiveness doesn't just come automatically. Forgiveness comes when you are true to yourself. When you have the conviction to say exactly what has happened, that you yourself know very well and you tell those people, whom you have harmed them, or hurt them—you tell them. So the child soldiers who have come have been forced. Our understanding is very clear. Only that government understands them differently, that they are criminals, we don't see them as criminals. We see them still as our children, who have been used, just like, a good knife can be misused. A knife can kill a person—but a knife itself doesn't kill. But somebody can use the knife to kill. So you'll see that what we are saying is that these are innocent children, who are victims of circumstances. Let us treat them as children. And then, let them tell their stories, so that they are set from their guilt. Not that the people are going to punish them. Not that when the truth is known, they will be punished for it. It is not in our culture, and it is not a biblical way of reconciliation. So, that is the most important thing, acceptance.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you, Bishop. I'm going to switch gears here and let's talk a bit about the future. As you and I have discussed before, the Goldin Institute has been working very hard to create a global forum for engaged grassroots leaders and activists like yourselves who are interested in discussing and working together on shared concerns and aspirations. And we've been working to create a global forum through our Goldin Institute Online, which will have a variety for tools for discussion and collaboration and also through holding annual Institute events like the one that is coming up here in Colombia on the issue of reintegration of child soldiers. I'd like to take this time to ask you about how this forum can be of most help to you and your colleagues around the world in addressing the child soldier issue and to get your feedback on what kinds of tools that we can incorporate into the Goldin Institute Online and just in general how these kind of cross-city partnerships can be of service to you.*

Bishop Ochola: That will be very helpful, because you see, the problem is that people are not putting their efforts together, to see that what they have, what you have and what I don't have, we can still say, this is what I have, this is what you have, let us put them together. So in that way, we can put our resources together and that will be something that can help many people.

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Because if I don't have, I get from you because you have. Where you don't have, you'll get from me what you don't have, so all of us will have something. Not that everybody is in himself or ourselves is sufficient in everything. So we have a saying, that a woman gives birth through the help of another woman. So in that way, we can support one another, and that is really what has been lacking, that cooperation network, where we all work together, we all do things together, for the good of humanity. We are just one people, one children of God, but we have not been able to utilize what good is given to us for the good of all. So, I would strongly support that.

Travis Rejman: *Wonderful, thank you, we look forward to working with you on that as we move forward. I'm curious if you have any insights that you could share with us about how other sectors of society can be engaged in the work of addressing the child soldier issue. In particular, how can we engage the business community, or educators, or the government officials or NGOs in this struggle to reintegrate child soldiers.*

Bishop Ochola: Yeah, and that is also a very good question. Because, you see, government doesn't know that it has come from the community, from the society. And yet, these are our children! In government, in business, in education, everywhere. They are the children of the society! And therefore, you see, society should be looked at as a mother. Our mother gives us life. They give us life. But sometimes we tend to do things that hurt them, because we look at them as women, rather than as our mothers. The gender issue would not be there if you look at your mother as mother, somebody who has given you life and meaning in this world. It would be completely different. But when you just look at somebody as female and male, then you begin to hate each other because in that way, you don't relate. But here, you relate directly, because she's your mother, and very very very very important to you because without her you would not be there. And so, what I'm saying here is that government, business, whatever, we can still work together for the good of humanity.

Travis Rejman: *We look forward to working with you to make that a reality as well. As you well know in your work with government leaders and religious leaders and so on, it's not always easy to get them to work together.*

Bishop Ochola: Not all, but some are good to work with, I know, because I worked with Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda who is the minister of internal affairs. Very understandable. He listens, he understands, he's actually, although he's in government, but I think his way of looking at things is completely different than other leaders in government. So we have good people like him, many of them, in government. A person like the former UN undersecretary, Jan Engeland. This is a man whose heart is open to all. You see the problem that a government has is the problem of foreign policy, where if your policy is against, is difficult, it may not be possible for you to do anything. But you see, the policies are made by people and if you have good people, you will

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have good policy. Policy that stands on the principles of respect for other people.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you, that's an interesting point. Bishop, as we get ready to go back down to Colombia to meet with our partners there, to discuss our agenda and the outcomes we hope to see from the 2007 Goldin Institute this fall, I'm curious if you have any advice for us about how you see the agenda shaping up, are there certain things you'd like to see us address or tackle during the week.*

Bishop Ochola: Yeah, for the agenda, think of something that unifies people. Something that brings people together. You see, when you are thinking of child soldiers, these child soldiers may not be here, they may be in Africa. And they may not be related to anybody here, but because they are human beings, our concern is that we as human beings have to show solidarity with all the people of God in the world and in that way, you know, we'll be physically affected when we are speaking of a child soldier who has been abused, who has been used, and we take him or her as a human being just like ourselves. If it were you, if it were myself, you know, what would I do, what would I wish to be done for me? So something that would really help us to understand that is to think of these children as part and parcel of our lives. So in that way, we can come with a meaningful agenda for what we intend to do, whether in Africa, or in Asia, or in Europe, or in North America. Because what brings us together is the most important thing: the common purpose, and the common goal.

What do we want? To achieve. Not just to give money because we have money. Not just to do charity because we want to do... charity must come from the heart of a human being, and that heart is a special gift from god, so you have this connectedness. That you don't just do it for the sake of giving money because you have too much of it, no, or you have too much time, to waste. No, you give for the sake of humanity, and for a common purpose.

Travis Rejman: *Well thank you Bishop, I hope that we'll be able to arrange the schedule so that you'll be able to lead a delegation from Uganda to join us down in Colombia.*

Bishop Ochola: I'll be grateful to come.

Travis Rejman: *Thank you Bishop, we look forward to having you. Well, as we wrap up our conversation here today, Bishop, is there anything else you'd like to share with people who are visiting the GI online site, or listening to this podcast?*

Bishop Ochola: Yeah, I think, when we think of the child soldiers, let us not forget their family, you know, the pain that the family is going through is even much more than what the child is going through because the child is going through physical, but parents are going through a lot of psychological torture in their hearts, that my child has been abused, my child has been denied

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their right to life, their right to education, to develop his or her potential. Seeing other children, other children who are now graduating from the university and our child is not one of them. It is a pain in heart of many families. Seeing that there are other children getting married, or maybe they have children now, but her son or her daughter has been completely ruined. We need to help both the parents and the children, the child soldiers, in my view.

Travis Rejman: *Well my friend, thank you again for taking the time to speak with us and share your wisdom and insights about this issue. It was a very interesting and engaging conversation for me and I hope it will be for our listeners on the Goldin Institute Online. Again, thanks so much for taking the time and I look forward to talking to you soon.*

Transcribed by Jon Lentz and Anders Bjornberg

