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The Plight of the African Child: Reflections on the Response of the Church

INTRODUCTION

Millions of children make their way through life impoverished, abandoned, uneducated, malnourished, discriminated against, neglected and vulnerable. For them life is a daily struggle to survive ... For these children childhood as a time to grow, learn, play and feel safe is in effect meaningless.¹ The above statement, though describing the state of children worldwide, indicates that the notion of the happy African child celebrated by the author Camara Laye in his book *The African Child* has long since gone.² War, poverty, malnutrition, starvation, Human Immuno-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and other diseases, exploitation, oppression, neglect and lack of education altogether demonstrate that present day Africa has denied the African child any true joy of living.

This article highlights the plight of the African child and the response of the Church to the most vulnerable in society. The main argument is that the church has a moral obligation to nurture and protect the children in obedience of Christ's command 'let the children come to me and do not stop them because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these' (Mt 19.14). The first section examines the significance of children in the traditional African society. Traditionally, the purpose of the marriage institution was procreation. Children were regarded as the seal of marriage. Parents had the role of looking after the well-being and development of their children, yet the whole community shared responsibility for child rearing.

Social, economic and cultural changes, however, have exposed African children to life-threatening situations. The second section identifies the various ways in which the African child is dehumanised. That this is contrary to Biblical tradition is analysed in the third section. In the

Gospels, Jesus identifies with the children and depicts them as models for adults of entering the reign of God. In response to Christ's call to hold children with dignity, the Church in Africa has put in place mechanisms to deal with all dehumanising conditions that impact negatively on them. It is concluded that the world as a whole must take a definite option for the children who suffer and are marginalised by channelling our resources, time and energy to their course.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY

In traditional African society there was a procreative emphasis in marriage due to the value attached to children. Marriage was believed to be divinely instituted and sanctioned. Child bearing was a sacred duty that had to be carried out because transmitting life meant sharing in the divine prerogative of creation itself.³ In some countries like Uganda, the name of God is often made part of the children's name. For example, *Bya Katonda* means 'for or by the creator'.⁴ This shows how people associated God with the continuation of life through the birth of children. Moreover, children served to perpetuate the family name and maintain the link between ancestors and the living.⁵ A woman's status in society was determined by the children she bore and her entire life was centred on them. In this connection, a childless marriage was disastrous for the couple. Roscoe, writing on the stigmatisation and plight of the barren woman, observes that 'Every married woman was anxious to become a mother ... A woman who had no children was despised and soon became a slave and drudge of the household'.⁶

Polygyny was allowed by custom, especially if children were not born in the earlier marriage. There were advantages of having a large family in a labour intensive economy. Children were also an economic investment in view of future marriage alliances and the acquisition of bride wealth in a patrilineal family system. The exchange of bride wealth helped to establish economic ties between the families involved. In addition, it encouraged the widening of matrimonial relationships and sealed the union. Thus, bride wealth was the most concrete symbol of marriage covenant and security.

An expectant mother would receive special treatment from her neighbours and relatives. She had to observe certain taboos and regulations partly because the pregnancy made her ritually impure and in order to protect the unborn child. Among the Akamba of Eastern Kenya, an expectant mother was forbidden to eat fat, beans and meat of animals killed with poisoned arrows. However, she could eat special kinds of earth found on anthills or trees. The earth was believed to strengthen the foetus. There is

some scientific truth in the beliefs concerning foods and they have developed out of people's experiences. Consuming meat of animals killed with poisoned arrows has in some instances caused premature births. The earth from the anthills has minerals, which do in fact strengthen the child's body.

Practices connected with the actual birth varied considerably, but they were very significant. For the Agikuyu of Central Kenya, birth would take place in the house under the care of elderly women. The placenta and the umbilical cord, which were symbols of the child's attachment to the mother and womanhood, were objects of special treatment. They would be deposited in an uncultivated field and covered with grain and grass.⁷ The uncultivated field is the symbol of fertility thus the rite of burying was a silent prayer that the mother's womb should remain fertile and strong for the birth of more children.

Socialisation of children revolved around preparation for family life through the assignment of various tasks and responsibilities. The puberty stage was the most important in the life of an African child. In many African communities it was marked with several rites of passage marking the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Arnold Van Gennep⁸ and Victor Turner⁹ have classified them into three: rites of separation, transition and incorporation. The initiation rites prepared the young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities. For example, among the Abaluhya of Western Kenya the rite of separation involved the circumcision of boys. The blood that was shed during the physical operation bound the individual to the departed members of the society; it signified a covenant or solemn agreement between the individual and his people.¹⁰ Henceforth he was regarded as an adult. Magesa points out that initiation rites were intended to be unforgettable reminders to the individual concerning the fulfillment of religious requirements for the perpetuation of life.¹¹

The instructions provided during this period were enhanced through the formation of age sets. These ensured the strict conformity to the expected codes of behaviour. Anyone who brought shame on the group risked being ostracised. Thus the age-set system was a strong factor in discipline.

Every child belonged to the whole community, and every member participated in bringing the children up. Diane and Philista¹² have observed that children belonged to the parents but also the group. They could be sent to live with relatives for years without their parents worrying. This was a sign of solidarity and the willingness of parents to share their precious gift with other relatives, especially the childless. Children

were expected to show respect and obedience to the elders in the community. This helped to integrate the vulnerable members, especially the orphans in the community.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that children were valued in African societies and they were a seal of marriage. Birth, childhood and initiation into adulthood were religious processes in which the child had to go through religious rites. These rites connected the individual child to other human beings, visible elements of creation and with the invisible world of God, the ancestors and spirits.

Traditional African customs and ideas concerning birth, childhood and adulthood have, however, been disrupted by socio-economic, political and cultural changes occasioned by globalisation. As a result, traditional societies have been disrupted. A new society is emerging; partly out of the old one, and partly in response to these changes.

Economic change is reflected in the introduction a cash economy, land shortage (due to rapid population growth) and rural-urban migration. These have had a profound effect on the family structure. Women are now the primary source of rural labour in food production.¹³ Men who migrate into the urban centres end up getting involved in other relationships due to loneliness. The tendency has been to abandon/neglect the rural family. The father may end up having two homes, one in the rural area and other in town.¹⁴ Discipline may be difficult for the children in the rural areas since in Africa, the father symbolises authority. With two homes, the children live and grow with no sense of belonging. This may create problems of identity for them leading to delinquency or lack of purpose in life, a symptom which is common among the African youth. The forces of globalisation have complicated the situation.¹⁵ The massive retrenchment that followed immediately after the privatisation of the means of production brought about changes that distorted the patterns of family life. In families whose bread earners faced compulsory redundancy, it became a problem to feed, educate and ensure medical care for the children and meet obligations towards the extended family.¹⁶ Unable to meet financial responsibilities, some families broke up, leading to an unparalleled influx of children onto the streets.

In some families, everyone had to be involved in income generating activities for survival. Fathers became businessmen, frequently travelling long distances for many days without contact with their families. Similarly, mothers began also to spend long hours away from their families. In some families children as young as seven years have been forced to abandon school, either to take care of their parents' businesses or to sell commodi-

ties in the markets and the streets.¹⁷ This leads to child labour, which is detrimental to the future well being of the child. All these practices are anti-family, as prolonged hours of the parents' absence deny the children parental love and care essential for their holistic development.

Ethical and moral problems arise from these social changes. The traditional extended family concept has shrunk to one in which the parents and the children constitute the family, yet the extended family once provided an important moral influence. The authority and respect which parents enjoyed under traditional morality and customs are being challenged by the young generation and in many homes children have rebelled against their parents.

Education of children is increasingly being passed on from parents and the community to teachers. This education is book-centred and an end in itself, rather than education which prepares them for adult life and future careers. Marriage and family instability have increased considerably. There are high rates of divorce and separation. These changes have weakened the traditional family and community support system and have led to child abuse and neglect. The following section examines some of these forms of child abuse.

CHILDREN IN JEOPARDY: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Child labour

Children comprise a massive global work force that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates to number 250 million. These children are between the ages of 5–14 years, yet the minimum age for employment is 14–16 years.¹⁸ Child labour is most acute in Africa, Asia and Latin America. According to the ILO, Africa has the highest number – 80 million or 41% – of child labourers in the world.¹⁹ In Kenya it has been observed that children between the age of 6 and 14 years are employed as domestic workers.²⁰ They are forced by poverty to abandon education in order to work for wages which contribute to the maintenance of their younger siblings. In 1997 post-genocide Rwanda had between 200,000 and 400,000 children living with families other than their own, many of these obliged to work as domestic servants.²¹

These child labourers work under exploitive, illegal, difficult and dangerous conditions. They are easy to coerce, cheap to support and ultimately disposable when they are no longer useful or profitable to those who exploit them. The majority of these children end up being emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. Child labour jeopardises the health

and well-being and education of young people. It is actually akin to slavery because it violates the fundamental right of all persons to life, liberty and security. Child labour undermines the rights of the child to grow up in the protective environment of the family. In this connection the children are denied the time and attention needed to develop self-esteem and emotional attachments to family and friends. The exploitive circumstances lead the children to internalise the lesson that the extent of their personal value is found in their usefulness as labourers. Gradually child labourers can perceive all of life's relationships, even the most intimate, through the narrow prism of utility.

Finally requiring children to work for hire is a direct violation of the moral pact that the adult world holds with the young ones. It is therefore the moral responsibility of all people to protect the children from whatever endangers their growth.

Sexual abuse

Adolescents and children are frequently forced into sexual experiences with adults by circumstances beyond their control. They are coerced, tricked or abducted often while fleeing situations of violent conflict. In February 2002, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees reported that children in refugee camps in West Africa were being targeted for sexual exploitation. Locally hired camp officials were demanding sex in exchange for medicine and food.²² Many children in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea pointed out that their giving into sexual demands was the only option they had for food and medicine.

In northern Uganda, the Lords Resistance Army (LRA), one of the world's most treacherous guerrilla forces operating under the leadership of John Kony, has been abducting children to serve as soldiers. Female children are used as sex slaves.²³ Many of the girls who escape bear the scourge of Sexually Transmitted Diseases including HIV/AIDS with which they have been infected by their captors.

The phenomenon of trafficking women and children has exposed them to sexual exploitation. The processes associated with globalisation of the economy have aggravated the problem of human trafficking. In their search for better living conditions, women and children in situations of abject poverty fall prey to traffickers. Many of these victims are from African countries, especially Ethiopia, Gambia, Zambia, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Their destination is often the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), North America and Europe. Trafficking deprives thousands of Africans of their

lives every year. In the year 2002 alone, hundreds of African children died on the high seas between west and Central Africa.²⁴ In specific African countries sexual abuse of children takes many forms. These include rape, incest defilement and sodomy among others. In a study carried out in a South African Children's Hospital about 45% of the children under the age of 15 were reported to have been sexually abused.²⁵

In Kenya, cases of sexual abuse have increased over the years. Both boys and girls are targets for sexual abuse, with about 16,482 cases reported every year.²⁶ figures at the Gender Recovery Centre at Nairobi Women's Hospital show that a woman is raped every thirty minutes. The perpetrators attack girls as young as five months and women as old as eighty-two years. Unfortunately, the perpetrators of these crimes are often close relatives, friends and neighbours. There have been many cases where babysitters, teachers and even parents have sexually abused children.

In North Eastern Kenya and especially among the rural communities where child marriages are culturally acceptable, parents have been marrying off their daughters to wealthy young men living in the Middle East, Canada and the United States of America. The girls are forced to drop out of school at an early age. About 200 secondary school girls have dropped out of school since last year (2005).²⁷ Some of them have been trafficked to the Middle East, Western Europe and North America for domestic and sexual servitude.

Myths such as the belief that HIV/AIDS can be cured through sex with a virgin have led to the sexual abuse of young girls.²⁸ Older men who are infected with HIV/AIDS engage in sex with the young girls with the belief that they will be cured. This has raised the demands for younger sex workers in the recent years. Surveys of Kenyan girls living in the streets indicate that as many as 30% are HIV positive.²⁹ Sexual exploitation of young girls is also common in homes where children are orphaned by HIV/AIDS. More often than not, the adolescent girls are left with family responsibilities without any source of income. The girls turn to commercial sex work as a means of livelihood.³⁰ In the long run they may get pregnant and/or are infected with HIV/AIDS thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the family.

A far greater number of children suffer the effects of child sexual abuse than it is generally assumed when moral, psychological and sexual boundaries are transgressed by adults who are in privileged positions. The psychological trauma inflicted is immense and long lasting and the social stigma prevents them from speaking out about rape and other forms of abuse. For affected girls and women, rape could end up in pregnancy while

for both genders there is the likelihood of being infected with Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS.

In recent years, a secret global subculture in cyber space has emerged where adults are preying on children. Children in Africa, especially in major urban centres have been victims. Adults have been visiting websites where exhibitionism and child rape are explicitly displayed. This is horrific debasement of the young people. It therefore calls for all responsible adults to use the same computer technology to track the criminal activities of paedophiles and unmask them.³¹

Child abandonment

Child abandonment is a common form of child abuse in Africa today. It often involves categories of children born with some form of disability who are left in the hospitals after birth. Others are thrown away by parents who cannot face the fact that they have given birth to deformed children.³² Young girls conceal the fact that they conceived before marriage by throwing newly born babies into dustbins and latrines. HIV/AIDS has led to an increase in the number of children abandoned by relatives. Approximately 14 million children worldwide have lost one or both parents due to AIDS, with 80% of these children living in sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya alone there are an estimated 890,000 orphans. These are without parental care, love and are deprived of their basic rights to shelter, food, health and education. With little or no support, these children suffer abandonment, exploitation and abuse. Some of these children move to live on the streets of urban centres.³³

The street children lack the supervision that would have been provided in a family setting. Consequently, they are exposed to many dangers. Some are used for criminal activities like drug trafficking. They are also exposed to sexual abuse. A large number of female street children end up in child prostitution.³⁴

Child soldiers

A child soldier is usually defined as anyone under the age of eighteen years who takes part in an armed conflict.³⁵ A report from the *African Conference on the use of children as soldiers* shows that there are multi-factors that influence children to become soldiers.³⁶ These include individual choice and coercion from the government or warring group(s). The following environments impact on the children's decision to be a child soldier: the presence of war and conflict, the breakdown of civil society, traditional values and family structures, lack of educational facilities and basic

services, extreme poverty, attractive military images in the media and inadequate or unimplemented legal standards.

Towards the close of the last century it was estimated that there were more than 300,000 children fighting in thirty conflicts around the world.³⁷ Among the countries that have used children as combatants are Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. In Sierra Leone the practice of using children by both the government and the rebel groups has been widespread and repulsive. Commanders in the nation's rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), have been abducting and terrorising children. The children are branded with knives on their fore heads and chests with rebel group initials (RUF).³⁸ The shame of being so branded has driven some of these children to pour acid on their bodies in an attempt to remove the marks.

Uganda has had a long history of child soldiers. The recruitment of children known as *Kadogos* (Swahili word meaning Small Ones) in the National Resistance Army (NRA) between 1981–1988 was copied and followed by both the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Allied Democratic Army.³⁹ In the northern part of the country, especially the Karamoja area, armed children are a common sight. This is the region largely occupied by the LRA.

The LRA has used these children in combat and as human shields. These rebels have gone to the extent of coercing the children to kill their parents. This is the final blow to any connectedness with their past. Surviving parents feel that their children will never fit into society after having survived the warfare. They will remain scarred by the trauma and brutality that has characterised their daily lives.⁴⁰

The use of children as soldiers presents grave human rights problems. Many of these children have been killed during the conflict, denied the most basic right, the right to life. Others have been deprived of their liberty by being forcibly conscripted by warring parties and separated from their families against their will. Some have been forced to kill or torture others with consequent severe psychological effects on these children. The children have not only lost their innocence but also their identity and individuality. As already noted, LRA child soldiers in Uganda are known only as *Kadogo* (Small Ones). This change of name signifies the complete depersonalisation of the child because the identity of an individual makes sense only in the context of relationships with others as brother, sister, uncle and friend among others.

Our collective failure to protect these children has deeply wounded their

trust in the adult world. Their long journey from shattered innocence to restored hope begins only when these young ones can begin to believe that the adult world that surrounds them will not harm them. Thus, one of the greatest ethical challenges of our day is to knit together a common front, a global safety net capable of ensuring that children everywhere grow up in an environment free from violence.

Important institutions of the society such as the Church have a responsibility to make the world safer for children. The scriptures have spoken poignantly about this responsibility. The prophet Isaiah admonishes us to 'see that justice is done ... help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights and defend widows' (Is 1.17).

THE MANDATE OF THE CHURCH

Old Testament evidence

In the Old Testament, children were valuable and considered precious before God. In Israel, a child was a blessing of God (Gen 21.1–7; Ruth 4.11–12; Ps 127.3–5; 128.3–4). Immortality was linked to living-on through children who carried on the name of their parents (Gen 48.16). When there were no offspring, the Levirate law provided for carrying on this name and for continuity through the nearest relative (Deut 25.5–10). Children were thought of as the crown of humanity, (Pr 17.6) and they participated in the liturgical celebrations (Ex 13.8–14). The Psalmist declares that even little children are able to perceive and praise the wonders of God's universe (Ps 8.2). Child sacrifice, which prevailed in the Ancient Near East, was detested and forbidden by Yahweh (Lev 18.21; 20.2–5; Deut 12.31).

In spite of the fact that the Old Testament treats children with dignity, there existed a wide gap between precept and practice. Jewish society discriminated against children along with women. Children were victims of injustice (Ex 15.22). Child sacrifices though forbidden by Yahweh were practiced in Israel (1 Kg 16.43; 2 Kg 16.3; 21.6; Jg 11.29–40; Is 5.5; Jer 7.31; 19.5).

Discrimination against the girl-child was rampant in Israel. They were denied education in the synagogue and were not allowed to participate in the prayers with their male counterparts.⁴¹ A girl could be married or sold off as a slave by the male head of the family without her consent.

According to Rabbinic teaching in the Talmud, talking to children lowered one's dignity.⁴² Therefore, it is not strange that the disciples did not allow children access to Jesus Christ (Mk 10.13). However, Jesus had

a deep love for children and referred to them in his preaching and in the practice of his ministry.

New Testament evidence

Jesus loved children and enjoyed being with them (Mk 10.14). He performed miracles of healing and gave them life. In Matthew 15.21–8, Jesus helped the daughter of the Canaanite woman and the child tormented and tortured by the evil Spirit (Lk 9.37–42). Jesus used the child as paradigm of the Kingdom; he invites the disciples to be humble like children in order to be members of the family of God (Mt 18.4). The humility of a child is presented as the characteristic of the disciple of Jesus and of all people in God's Kingdom. Jesus wants his disciples to have total dependence and trust of God and experience the power of God that will make them servants of the Kingdom.

In the mission of Jesus we discover that the Kingdom of God is revealed in and through the poor and little ones (Lk 6.20). God chooses what is foolish, weak, low and despised in the world (1Cor 1.27–8). Therefore Jesus respected, accepted, loved and treated children as persons in a society where they were marginalised. Subsequently, it is a historical imperative for the Church to be concerned about them.

THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO THE MARGINALISED
OF THE WORLD

The Church is awakening to the voice of Christ and is acting to give hope and future to the African child. It is building on the gains that have already been made elsewhere by the advocates of the child, and above all, the will of Christ for the African child: 'I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' (Jer 29.2).

It has been observed in this chapter that poverty, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS are among the greatest threat to childhood today. The Church in Africa has begun to respond to each of these challenges in variant ways in order to reduce the incidences of child abuse and neglect. Exploitive child labour practices are both the result of extreme poverty and a chief cause of its continuance. There exists real opportunities for overcoming poverty in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).⁴³ Each of the MDGs is connected to the well being of children, from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to protecting the environment for future generation.⁴⁴

In response to the MDGs, the book *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth*

formulated '2015 Millennium Goals for the Churches: A Call to Action'.⁴⁵ Out of the ten MDGs, the fifth and seventh stand out as particularly relevant for the churches. The fifth is to 'Re-examine the reasons for supporting poverty related projects and programmes to make sure they are advocates of fundamental structural change in favour of the poorest'.⁴⁶ The seventh urges the Church to 'Participate in National Poverty Reduction Strategies'.⁴⁷ As a result of these, the Churches in Africa are committed to delivering services and promoting community development through projects. In Kenya for example, the churches have facilitated the establishment of income generating projects by providing financial assistance (micro-financing) to the poor in the rural areas. In addition the Church has been using its moral authority and ethical standards as an agent of social transformation to influence changes in attitudes and improve on governance and public accountability in order to tackle the problems of poverty and injustice, gender inequality and corruption.⁴⁸

The church in Africa has been openly condemning the moral decay of the society that has led to various forms of violence against the vulnerable members of the society. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), in partnership with National Councils of Churches and other ecumenical organisations have been speaking out on issues of human sexuality, HIV/AIDS gender-biased rituals (Female Genital Mutilation) and gender based violence, especially rape and defilement.⁴⁹

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has been very active in addressing gender-based violence and other social ills.⁵⁰ The *Circle* has noted that the unhealed wounds of incest, rape and sexual abuse affect the sexual lives of survivors and have been one of the causes of dysfunctional marriage relationships. Thus, it has initiated the Tamar campaign in many African countries so that the sexually abused, especially women and girls, can speak out and share their horrific experience and thus begin the healing process.⁵¹

The response of the Church to the HIV/AIDS scourge has been ambivalent. Initially, many Christians stigmatised HIV positive people, accusing them of being promiscuous. However, the situation has changed and the stigmatisation and institutional silence of some Churches have come to an end. Faith-based organisations in African countries put together innovative responses for people affected and infected by HIV/AIDS. Such organisations in Kenya have provided support to guardians, orphans and vulnerable children.⁵² The orphans are enrolled in schools, provided with free health care and food supplements. The guardians are helped to set up income generating projects such as dairy farming and tailoring. These

projects are funded by the Hope for African Children Initiative (HACI).⁵³ This is a Pan-African initiative that provides technical, financial and material resources to enable community based organisations to continue providing needed services to women, young people, orphans and vulnerable children affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. The faith-based organisations have also empowered children affected by HIV/AIDS to participate where possible in decision-making regarding their future through the Memory Book project.⁵⁴

Some Churches have established institutions to take care of abandoned HIV positive orphans. The Nyumbani (the Swahili word for home) home was the first hospice for HIV positive orphans in Kenya.⁵⁵ In this home, children live in clusters of fifteen, each with a housemother so that they can have the experience of a 'loving home'. The principle caretakers are women religious of the congregation of the *Adoration Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament*.⁵⁶ Nyumbani also offers a community-based outreach program that provides care for 300 HIV-positive orphans living in the city of Nairobi and its environs.

The plight of women and children in areas of armed conflict is a major challenge to the Church in Africa. The Church has the capacity to mobilise the community and initiate dialogue in areas of conflict. In Sudan, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) has initiated the *People-to-People-Peace-Making-Process* at the grassroots level in the south and other marginalised areas, particularly among the Nuer and Dinka. NSCC has mobilised and facilitated more than twenty significant peace conferences and meetings in the past six years. These conferences have involved chiefs, community leaders, liaison officers from the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the United Democratic Salvation Front (UDSF). NSCC organised the first meeting at Lokochioggio in North Western Kenya in 1998, which produced the 'Loki Accord'. Among the resolutions passed, three are important:

1. The killing/abduction of women and children is to be halted,
2. Recently abducted women and children are to be returned,
3. Peace meetings are to be held throughout all communities on the banks of the Nile.⁵⁷

As a result of the *People-to-People Peace-Making Processes* hostilities in large parts of southern Sudan have reduced significantly. Indeed the long awaited peace for Sudan seems finally to be coming to some state of fruition, although the death in a helicopter crash of the newly appointed Vice-President John Garang (the long time Southern Sudan Liberation

Leader) in July 2005 was a major blow.

In order to deal with the conflict situation caused by the LRA in Northern Uganda, Church leaders have formed groups to mediate for peace and to encourage the warring groups to consider peaceful options towards the cessation of conflict. In June 1993 the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), consisting of three Churches – Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox – began voters' education, the monitoring of elections and provision of a wider civic education to the public. It is hoped that all parts of Uganda suffering from armed conflicts will be sensitised through civic education on peace.⁵⁸ In the end, the most vulnerable members of the society – women, youth and children, will be empowered supporters of the peace movement.

Catholic women religious together with the Uganda Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace have been organising massive peace prayers to influence the government of President Yoweri K. Museveni to commit itself to a peaceful resolution to conflicts in north and western Uganda. The first peace prayer was held in March 1997 and three things have happened since:

1. The organising committee formed a permanent Peace Initiative Group, an interfaith group that includes Muslims, which meets once every month.
2. From this group came the Uganda Peace Network based mainly in Gulu/Kitgum.
3. Sister Rachella Farcella of St Mary's College, Aboke has been courageous in freeing some of the Aboke school girls abducted by the LRA. She has also publicised the crime globally.⁵⁹

During war, child soldiers are physically abused and mentally traumatised. In order to address these problems, the government and non-governmental organisations are trying to rehabilitate and facilitate social re-integration of former child soldiers. Social re-integration of demobilised child soldiers is necessary because they have become detached from the norms and values of the society during the many years of fighting. The Gulu United to Save the Children Organisation (GUSCO) is a non-governmental organisation that has set up a camp in the Gulu area for the rehabilitation of formerly abducted children in Uganda. The mission of GUSCO is to help the children reclaim their lives from their captors and ultimately be free of fears that dominated their lives while in captivity.

In Liberia, the Lutheran Church of Liberia (LCL) in collaboration with

the Lutheran World Federation/World Service (LWF/WS) are running a Trauma Health and Reconciliation Program for former child soldiers and their families. LCL and LWF/WS through this program have been trying to re-orient former child soldiers and the whole society from war to peace and normal life. This process of rehabilitation also involves helping the former child soldiers to acquire skills and respect for the social and cultural values of society.

CONCLUSION

The condition of most children in Africa is depressing. Many of them do not have the necessary facilities and opportunities to live normal and healthy lives. This is quite a contrast to the situation of the child in the Africa tradition society where the child was valued. The survival of children in Africa depended on family stability and cooperation. However, kinship roles have changed in the context of the economic transformation of the society. Thus, the collective responsibility for the care and nurture of children has ceased.

The Church, with its solid organisational structure, has moved to provide a favourable environment for the African children. It has been drawn by Christ's example of his preferential love for children and in presenting them as a paradigm of the Kingdom. Therefore Christians are called to be protagonists of children's dignity and rights. In recognition of the plight of the African child, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) has declared 2006 to be the year of the African child, and has produced a video 'The Church Awakens: New Hope for the African Child'. This video is meant to sensitise the Churches in Africa on the need to protect and secure the future for the African child.

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NOTES

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6. J. Roscoe, 1911. *The Baganda*. New York: MacMillan and Company, p. 46.
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 40. D. Donald. 2004. p. 18.
 41. J. Jeremias. 1975. *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, p. 364.
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 43. Out of the Millennium Development Goals, the church has developed ten goals which are supposed to guide it on issues of poverty and wealth in the twenty-first century.
 44. UNICEF 2005. *The State of the World's Children 2006: Excluded and Invisible*. New York: UNICEF, p. 4.
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 46. Stein Villumstad. 2005. *Social Reconstruction of Africa: Perspectives from Within and Without*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, p. 37.
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 48. Kibuga Kariithi and Dennis Tongoi (eds). 2005. *Building A Prosperous Kenya: A Perspective for the Church, God's Primary Agency for Social Transformation*. Nairobi: Christians for a Just Society, pp. 38–9.
 49. All Africa Conference of Churches is a Pan-African ecumenical body inaugurated in 1963. Its membership is drawn from Churches and Associated National Councils of Churches.
 50. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is an Interfaith association formed in 1989. The Circle was born during the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade. It has helped create critical awareness of Women's theological concerns in Churches and theological institutions.

51. The Tamar Campaign is based on the rape narrative of Tamar, the daughter of King David, by her half brother Amnon, 2 Samuel 13.1–22, the subsequent attempt by Tamar to make the crime public and how David, Absalom, Amnon and other males conspire to cover up the rape and incest.
52. Margaret Gecaga. 2005, pp. 126–33.
53. Hope for Africa Children Initiative. N.D. 'Frequently Asked questions'. Inter-Religious Council of Kenya Centre, Nairobi.
54. Terminally ill parents and their children work together to compile the memory book which is often an album containing photos, written anecdotes and other family memorabilia.
55. Nyumbani Home was established by a Catholic Priest, Fr Angelo D. Agostino.
56. D. Donald. 2004, p. 113.
57. New Sudan Council of Churches 2002. *Inside Sudan: The Story of People-to-People Peace Making in Southern Sudan*. Nairobi: NCCC, p. 50.
58. John Mary Waliggo. 2004, p. 381.
59. These were schoolgirls abducted by the Lords Resistance Army. Many of them were held for use as sex slaves in their camps.