

EDITORIAL: Women of Kireka set worthy example

December 2, 2005

Posted: 12/02/05

EDITORIAL: Women of Kireka set worthy example

Before long, *Time* magazine will unveil its Person of the Year for 2005. The editors probably have made their selection already, or at least they have narrowed the field to a group of finalists. If not, they would do well to consider the women of Kireka, Uganda.

Reporter Bruce Nolan of *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans told their story on Thanksgiving Day. The *Dallas Morning News* repeated it in an editorial last week.

Kireka is a slum overlooking Kampala, Uganda's capital city, in west-central Africa. It's a one-industry town: The men strip-mine boulders from quarries on the hillside. The women pound the boulders into stones the size of walnuts, which are used for construction. They work by hand, pulverizing stone by stone. They earn \$1.20 per day.



Kireka is a refugee colony. Many residents are members of the Acholi tribe, who were run out of northern Uganda by a civil war that has devastated the region for many years. They subsist in Kireka, but their hearts beat far from home.

Most of the women in Kireka also are HIV-infected or have full-blown AIDS. In the early '90s, a quarter of the Ugandan population was exposed to AIDS. And although that percentage has decreased—due in large part to education and to Christian-backed abstinence programs—the consequences of the disease will linger for decades. So, the chronically ill women climb the hillside every morning to break rocks to earn a little money to feed their children.

But although they live in a refugee slum, and their bodies are wasting away because of disease, poverty and inhuman labor, their hearts are huge. They felt the pain of tsunami victims late last year, and they experienced the agony of Hurricane Katrina victims this summer and early fall.

When the women of Kireka heard how Katrina wrecked the U.S. Gulf Coast and scattered other mothers and their children far from home, they wanted to help. They shared their concern with Rose Busingye, a Ugandan nurse who founded a relief agency to assist the residents of Kireka. With Busingye's help, they banded together—200 women strong—to pool their earnings and send them to victims of Katrina.

They collected almost \$900. Can you comprehend that sacrifice? It defies the imagination: These Ugandan women make only \$1.20 per day and battle disease and malnutrition every waking hour. Yet they care so much for victims of a storm on the other side of the globe that many of them broke rocks for weeks to donate most of their income to people uprooted by Katrina. They gave their money to AVSI, a Catholic Italian aid organization in Kampala, which is channeling the money to the United States.

They did it because they relate closely to people who understand loss, Busingye explained: "Those people who are suffering, they belong to us. They are our people. Their problems are our problems. Their children are like our children."

For women like Akulla Margaret, who knows she will die of AIDS, the chance to help another sufferer is intensely personal. "When I die, my children will be left like those in America. Someone will have to care for them," she said. "I want to care for someone also."

The article and editorial didn't say so, but the women of Kireka most likely were empowered by the Spirit of Christ. According to *Operation World*, Uganda's population is 89 percent Christian, and these women worked through two Christian relief organizations. At any rate, their gifts reflected Christ's kind of love. It's *agape*, the willful love that sacrifices so that another is blessed, the selfless love that asks nothing in return, the bountiful love that grows as it is given away.

The *Morning News* editorial astutely compared these women to the widow, praised by Jesus, whose offering consisted of two copper coins. Jesus declared she had given more than all the big shots who wrote their offerings on fat checks with many zeroes. "All these people gave out of their wealth," he said, "but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

We have reached the time of year when Baptists traditionally give offerings to support foreign missions. This year, many other worthy causes seek our help, particularly those that have provided relief from the disasters that have besieged our world, but also those whose receipts have been down because hurricane relief has been up. We can wring our hands and worry about the magnitude of the need. Or we can adopt the attitude of the women of Kireka.

Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.