

The role of the religious leaders

Carlos Rodriguez



Source: Father Carlos Rodriguez



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Father Carlos Rodriguez is secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Gulu. He has worked with Kitgum Peace & Justice Committee and Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative on peacebuilding and human rights education and advocacy.

During the early years of the war in Acholiland, religious leaders in the region focused primarily on providing moral and practical support to their parishioners and Church institutions became centres of support for thousands seeking shelter from the violence. Over time a greater consensus emerged amongst church leaders in the North on the need to be proactive in 'bearing witness' about the conflict and to engage directly in peacebuilding. This transformation has resulted in a number of initiatives that have placed religious leaders at the heart of efforts to support a political resolution of the conflict and to address the consequences of the war. The most prominent bodies conducting these initiatives have been the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) and the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC).

When the NRM government came to power in 1986, both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Uganda were regarded with some suspicion by NRM leaders whose secular ideology viewed these religious institutions as divisive and as potential opponents. As the rebellion started in Acholiland in August 1986, religious leaders of the Catholic and Anglican churches were branded as 'rebel collaborators' and were subjected to harassment and threats. This occurred within the context of a residual historical rivalry and mistrust between the two religious bodies, which made it difficult for them to undertake common initiatives. Furthermore, the churches in the north had little concrete support or sympathy from their counterparts elsewhere in the country, most of whom tended to support the government and tacitly viewed the war as remote and not of concern.

Some church leaders participated in the peace talks between the LRA and the Government in 1993-94. Following their collapse, two massacres in Kitgum in 1995 motivated the newly created Anglican Diocese of Kitgum led by Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola, who had participated in the failed negotiations, and the Catholic

Comboni Fathers to begin an ecumenical initiative to 'speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.' In 1996, an inter-faith group in Gulu organised peace training workshops and the first public prayer for peace – an event that narrowly avoided being banned as groups advocating negotiated solutions were regarded with intense suspicion by government officials. These events marked the first significant peace initiatives instigated by religious institutions. Yet the violence continued to escalate. In 1997, Bishop Ochola chaired a series of meetings between Catholic and Anglican, and later Muslim, officials to discuss the situation. That August, they organised a peace rally and issued an unequivocal message asking the LRA to stop its violence against civilians and calling on the government to seek a negotiated end to the conflict. This event was followed in September by a workshop that produced a strongly worded publication denouncing the UPDF's attempts to force villagers into the displacement camps. This letter was read in most churches and met with an angry response from political leaders.

From these experiences, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative was formally inaugurated in February 1998 with the Anglican Bishop of northern Uganda Nelson Onono-Onweng as its founding Chair. Its first major event was the Bedo Piny pi Kuc (sitting down for peace) conference. It drew over 150 Acholi who discussed the causes and effects of the insurgency, the reasons for its persistence and possible strategies to end it. They concluded that 'the insurgency cannot be won by the gun' and subsequently called for dialogue between the government and the LRA, an amnesty and efforts at reconciliation through the Acholi traditional practice of *mato oput*. They agreed that Acholi religious leaders would work with other Acholi civil society and political leaders within Uganda and in the diaspora to help achieve these aims. The event marked a turning point, and the unity of the Anglican and Catholic churches was in itself a symbol of reconciliation given their history of division along political lines.

ARLPI subsequently developed its activities in a number of directions: continuation of efforts to build a public consensus for peace through sensitisation, training and dialogue; advocacy for specific policies, especially the amnesty law; and mediating or supporting negotiations. The next year, it held a joint international conference with ACORD and issued a communiqué setting forth a 'reconciliation agenda' that it has since sought to promote. Through staffed offices in Gulu and Kitgum, a network of peace committees and volunteer 'peace animators' has been established throughout the region. It has regularly organised large rallies and other events to promote the peace agenda. These events have largely been ignored in the national media, reinforcing a distorted image of an Acholi society not interested in ending the conflict.

In its advocacy capacity, ARLPI has consistently called for an end to violence, dismantling of the IDP camps, and the use of negotiations to end the conflict. It has sought to raise international awareness of the situation by lobbying foreign governments and INGOs. The most sustained effort was on securing an amnesty law and, once the 1999 Amnesty Act was passed, promoting its implementation. When making public statements the religious leaders emphasise the complementarity of the Acholi reconciliation system of *mato oput* with the Biblical understanding of unconditional forgiveness. The Catholic Justice and Peace Commission complements these policy efforts with human rights monitoring and documentation. It publishes a monthly newsletter describing local developments and has advocated investigations into a number of cases of gross abuses, such as the alleged killing of thirty children shot by the UPDF in a helicopter gunship ambush against the LRA in 1997 and cases of returned abducted children held in military installations.

In addition to seeking to address the war with the LRA, ARLPI has also sought to play a role in mediating other conflicts. The seasonal Karamojong (Jie) migration into eastern Acholiland is often accompanied by violence. ARLPI therefore initiated the Acholi-Jie Peace Dialogue and Reconciliation dialogue process, and a series of meetings from November 2000 to May 2001 led to a more peaceful dry season.

Since its inception, ARLPI has sought to draw the senior LRA leadership into peace talks. While meaningful high level meetings remain elusive, discreet contacts by some religious leaders with field commanders have taken place. The main focus has been around implementation of the amnesty law, which allows combatants to report to religious leaders. These initiatives have encountered difficulties, particularly in co-ordination with local UPDF units. One of the 'bush peace talks' with junior LRA officers was attacked by a UPDF unit on 26 April 2001 – even though Fr Tarcisio Pazzaglia alerted the military authorities prior to the meeting. Despite the risks, ARLPI and other traditional leaders remain committed to continuing these efforts that offer hope for demobilising the LRA.

Most ordinary people in Acholiland, without regard to their membership of a religious community, have trust in the motivations of the religious leaders to play a meaningful role in the search for peace. Thus far the religious leaders have resisted the temptation to present themselves as the ones who can deliver peace. After fifteen years of brutality, the community has become weak and divided, and to address this challenge, the religious leaders are promoting a philosophy that sees the creation of peace as a long-term, group effort.