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An exceptional welcome

Church bends rules for deacon

By Frank E. Lockwood
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

The Rev. Anna Gulick has a gift for languages. She can read the New Testament in Greek. Spread the gospel in Japanese. Share her faith in French and German.

Unfortunately, none of those languages is terribly useful in the Church of Uganda, which the 87-year-old deacon joined after cutting ties to the more liberal Episcopal Church USA.

So Gulick is learning a new language -- Runyoro -- which, along with English, is widely spoken in the Ugandan diocese of Bunyoro-Kitara.

Her textbook is a copy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, printed in Runyoro, a gift from the diocese's bishop, the Rev. Nathan Kyamanywa.

"It's a very complicated language," said Gulick, a retired missionary and Asbury College professor. "There's a great deal more I don't know than I do. But I can say 'praise the Lord': Mukama Asiiimwe."

Gulick's accent isn't quite right yet, but the bishop, who is visiting Kentucky this month, is helping her improve. "He laughs at me when I try to pronounce it, but I do the best I can," she said.

Uganda, which gained its independence from the British in 1962, retains spiritual ties to the Church of England. Roughly 8 million people belong to the Church of Uganda -- which (along with the Episcopal Church) is a member of the 77-million member Anglican communion.

But ties are strained because of differences over scriptural authority and the acceptance of homosexuality.

Last year, Gulick and other members of Lexington's Church of the Apostles left the Episcopal Church and formed Apostles Anglican Church.

Kyamanywa agreed to welcome the new congregation into his diocese, enabling the Kentucky church to keep ties to the worldwide Anglican communion.

But he hesitated to accept Gulick as a deacon in his church. Her gender wasn't the problem. It was her age.

In Uganda, clergy must retire when they turn 65.

Determined to leave the Episcopal Church, Gulick was prepared to give up ordained ministry if necessary, but the bishop ended up waiving the rules.

"I decided to take her on until God decides otherwise," Kyamanywa said.

The change in affiliations wasn't difficult for Gulick.

"It was freedom to preach the Scriptures, to believe the Scriptures, to live the Scriptures," she said. "And this bishop has been such a blessing to me."

Now, thanks to Kyamanywa's friendship, Gulick is on Uganda's spiritual radar.

"He asked my permission to have his prayer warriors pray for me, and I would wake up in the middle of the night and know they were praying," Gulick said.

The bishop, 49, now serves as her unofficial spiritual adviser and her "chief pastor."

"I am under ecclesiastical obedience to him," Gulick said. "If he says I can't do something, I just can't argue."

They communicate periodically, exchanging e-mails "when they don't have a power outage," Gulick said. "There's been drought in east Africa. ... When the rivers dry up or when the dams are empty, they have to wait for them to fill" so there's water to generate electricity.

The two have formed a bond, despite the distance. "He's my bishop. He's my friend in God. He's my shepherd in God," she said.

Gulick is learning as much as she can about Uganda but doubts she'll ever travel there.

"My doctor says I could probably survive the trip," Gulick said with a chuckle. "But he said I probably wouldn't survive much afterward."

Kyamanywa said Gulick, the oldest active clergy member in the Church of Uganda, has spiritual depth.

"Her walk with the Lord is real. It is not superficial. It is intense," he said.

Gulick plans to continue working with Kyamanywa and studying Runyoro, which she says is easier to learn than Japanese.

Gulick said that Francis Xavier, the famous 16th-century Catholic missionary, "said that the Japanese language was a particular invention of the devil to prevent the understanding of the gospel, and that is true." In Japanese, "there is no definite future, so you say, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you *might* be saved (instead of *shall* be saved.) It's a problem."

"Now I don't know what problems there are in using the (languages of Uganda), but they seem to have communicated the gospel pretty well."

Reach Frank Lockwood at (859) 231-3211 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3211, or flockwood@herald-leader.com.