

## The Beggars

### A NEW IDEA

**I**N MY DEALINGS WITH the children, I came into daily contact with more and more beggars, prostitutes, and lepers; with the halt, the lame, and the blind. As I helped the children, I wondered whether there was any way I could help these people, too. In the West, trying to persuade people to go work in Uganda, I was often asked if any professional qualifications were required. I always replied that the qualification was simple: It was love. I was not referring to the celluloid love of Hollywood but to the love of a Gary Bajus: love in word and deed. The children had been turned into a family, but what could I give the beggars to bring meaning to their lives?

During the Liberation War, the beggars had left the city, but by 1982 they had returned, particularly on the verandas of the then-vacated Barclay's Bank, on Janaan Street, on Luwumu Street, on William Street, and at the bus park. On March 20, 1982, I decided to call a meeting of the beggars at the Kampala bus park. At that meeting, I invited them to come to the Africa Foundation so that together we could plan what to do to improve their situations. We decided that a workshop would be an excellent beginning, and so the following Saturday, more than 150 beggars converged at the Foundation. I needed desperately to gain insight into their needs, philosophies, and ways of thinking, so I employed the artistry in me. I gave each person paper, paint, and brushes and asked them to portray on paper their perception of the world. I hoped that the paintings would tell us what they could not put into words. They quickly began working quietly, paying no attention to my coming and going. The results were astonishing.

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I had asked my secretary to record the events of this meeting, but after ten minutes, she passed me a note saying that she was ill and needed to leave. Of course, I agreed. When the workshop was over, I went to my office to find her still there. I was surprised to find that she had not gone home. She explained that she was not ill but pregnant and that she was afraid that if she stayed and looked at the ugly sights of the deformed beggars, she would produce a deformed baby. The sight of the beggars was indeed grotesque, but the smell was just as horrible. These people never washed. Some had long, soiled hair, and others had twisted faces with half shaven heads painted with blood. Some appeared to have infected wounds on their faces, hands, and chests. Some of the women had small children whom they used as begging pets.

The women produced mostly decorative patterns, but the men painted solid images. One man painted a picture of water lilies and later explained that the secret of a happy life was found in floating as a water lily floats. Another man painted a bold red circle, and inside it he drew a human being in the form of a lizard. His picture reminded me of the aboriginal paintings I had seen in Australia. I asked him what it meant, and he told me that the world is like a ball in which humanity is being squeezed. I was amazed at his ability and asked him whether he was aware of his talent for painting. He did not answer me.

I had invited Eli Kyeyune, a prominent artist, to be an external examiner, and he selected the painting of the lizard as the best of all the paintings. When Eli left, the man who had painted that winning picture called me aside to speak to me where no one could hear. We walked over to a corner of the room where the man proceeded to show me a terrible wound on his right leg that was so deep that the bones were visible. "I am not a beggar," he explained. "I live among the beggars because they feed me. I am a beggar among the beggars, for they are better than me. They have a will to live, but I yearn only for death. I sit in the rain hoping I will catch a fever and die. There is not a day I do not yearn for death. Why do you tell me that I have talent? I have nothing, and you will not allow me to die in peace. Why do you make me to suffer?"

I do not remember what I said to him, but when I finished, he stared at me for a long time. Then he spoke. "Can you get me money to return to the hospital to have my wound healed?"

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In less than a week, eleven beggars with chronic diseases returned to the hospital for treatment. All went willingly, convinced of a new sense of their own worth after realizing their talents in art.

At their first meeting, the beggars had elected a chairman, Hamzat Nvule. Nvule was a leper who had lost a leg, his nose, and all his fingers due to the disease. The beggars had, however, chosen wisely. Nvule had a brilliant mind, the qualities of leadership, and even a photographic memory. He was among those who went to the hospital and returned with a certificate to show that he had completed his full course of leprosy treatment.

Nvule explained to me what it meant to be a beggar. He himself owned a piece of land at Nyenga, where he also had a wife and children. Every Friday, he went home to his family. He explained that the beggars knew each other by name and knew to which camp each beggar belonged. They identified themselves as Barclays, William Street, or bus park members. Each had his own territory, and no beggar interfered with another's place of begging.

Nvule advised that we should make materials available to enable the beggars to discover their hidden talents in such areas as handicrafts, basketry, weaving, carving, tailoring, and shoe making and repairing. They would come each day to the workshop and produce products to be sold. Nvule also advised that, in addition to food, I should give a small financial reward. So every beggar who came to the workshops received one meal a day and, at the end of each day, was given 250 Ugandan shillings. The pay was enough to buy a kilo of sugar, a kilo of meat, or two or three very large pieces of soap.

Unfortunately, a problem soon developed. The word had gotten out that the Africa Foundation was giving out money and free food, and people who were not true beggars began showing up in droves. It was Nvule who found the solution. He suggested that I announce publicly that we were no longer giving money at the end of the day. Soon only the beggars remained. Nvule, who knew the true beggars, continued to distribute money each night to those who had worked in the shop during the day.

I was puzzled by the fact that the workshop was empty every Friday. Nvule explained to me that the Moslems had a belief that giving alms to beggars on Fridays would secure the salvation of the almsgiver. It was definitely more profitable for the beggars to be on the streets that day than weaving or painting in the workshop! I had been encouraging the public

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to stop throwing money to the beggars and to begin thinking of projects that would make the beggars self-reliant. Now I realized that the religion of many of the people was actually promoting the begging lifestyle.

### THE HUTTERIANS

Early in our ministry to the beggars, I visited the Hutterian Brethren in America. The group, a branch of Anabaptists similar to the Amish and Mennonites, live a simple lifestyle and hold to a strong sense of community life. I went to America to seek their guidance, hoping to discover some creative ideas to incorporate into the lives of the indigent Ugandans. I was met at the airport by Hans Meier and other brothers, who took me to Woodcrest, where I was greeted with love and friendship. The people were eager to know about my work, so I enthusiastically outlined to them the needs of the Ugandan beggars.

That evening I had dinner with over four hundred members of the community. After the meal, I was invited to attend the brotherhood meeting. This was a great honor for me, for it is there that the members meet and decide together the major issues and concerns of the community. I shared with the brothers the story that Jesus told of the man who, when he received a friend at night, had nothing to put before him. I related closely to that man, as I had nothing to put before 150 beggars in Uganda.

At the meeting, Christopher Arnold, the community leader, put a proposal to the brotherhood to look into the needs of these 150 beggars. It was decided to send immediate relief. The brothers shared the need with the other surrounding communities, and they all voted unanimously to support our ministry to the beggars. The same night the brotherhood agreed to send a container of relief goods to Uganda as soon as possible. My heart overflowed with joy when they shared with me their decision.

Gradually, I learned more of how the brotherhood operated. Hans Meier explained to me that all worked for the common good of the community. No member drew a salary, but each received according to his need. I wondered how the beggars would respond to such a concept and resolved to raise this issue with them upon my return.

I felt it would be best to broach the issue in my Bible studies with the beggars, as it was definitely a scriptural practice. In one evening study, we looked at Acts 4:32, which says, "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of

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the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.” We also read Acts 4:35: “And laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.”

I asked them what they thought these verses meant. One member insisted the passage meant that if one of them had a bicycle, that all must have bicycles since they all had to have things in common. That answer brought laughter from the others. Another said that each had a different need: one may want a bicycle; another may not, while those without legs to ride a bicycle or walk may need a wheelchair. Some would need neither, but fees for their children’s schooling, while those without children had no school fees to pay.

At this point, I interrupted and pointed out that even in the Foundation, the needs of each member were different. The general manager had four children, while the lady who serves the tea had six. Yet the salary of the manager was three times greater. I then asked them to question the whole idea of salaries, especially in the family of Africa Foundation. The arguments went back and forth, and finally, Hamzat Nvule spoke:

“For many years I have been begging to keep my family and to pay for my children’s schooling. Yet now I and my family live better in the love of the Foundation than many who are paid salaries every month. Let us receive according to our needs, and let us all respond to the needs of each individual member.”

The members then passed a resolution that from henceforth, the new community, the family of beggars, would each receive according to his needs rather than a set amount for all. This new policy not only provided for the necessities of the members, but fostered love and a compassionate attitude among the group. They learned to resist greed and to be concerned about each other in a new and fresh fashion.

The Hutterians’ forty-foot container soon arrived. It was filled with farming implements, used clothing, and many tools for making and repairing shoes. We occupied a shop on Luwumu Street where the women made sweaters and the men made shoes, wallets, belts, and many other leather items. A committee set up by the beggars themselves, under the chairmanship of Hamzat Nvule, monitored the income and deposited all the money into a bank account.

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By the end of 1982, the beggars had a great deal of money in the account. With the clothes and bedding that came in the Hutterian containers, the image of the beggars changed tremendously. After all, they now had the most profitable project in town!

At the end of the year, they divided the proceeds “as each person had need.” Over one hundred of them returned to their communities of origin. Money was designated to each individual to buy a plot of land and to build a small house. Those who had homes with thatched roofs turned them into metal roofs. They were encouraged to grow food and cash crops. By mid-1983, they were running their own projects. Only five beneficiaries, including Hamzat, remained in the city, and the project came to a close.

### A FAILED EXPERIMENT

Another benefit that we received from our relationship with the Hutterians came in the form of a creative worker. The Hutterian community from England sent a young man named Simeon to help with children of Africa Foundation. Simeon became houseparent for the older boys at Moneko Farm. He worked well and was very tough on discipline.

Simeon suggested that since street children had such well-built bodies, we should try them out in boxing. I had no objection to the boys' learning a new sport, so Simeon hired a trainer. Their first fight was at Kayunga between the police and the children of the Foundation. The occasion attracted almost the whole town of Kayunga. Ayub boxed a policeman out of the ring in the second round, and the fight was called a knockout. The Africa Foundation team was declared over-all winners and returned home victorious and jubilant. Simeon was particularly pleased because the game had proven him right. The children's tremendous physical energies had been put to good use.

That same week Simeon received a report that some of the older boys were still smoking dope. Moniko Farm where they lived was a tea plantation with coffee trees and a coffee factory. The boys were hiding among the coffee trees for their smoking sprees, so Simeon also hid among the trees and caught them red-handed. The boys boxed him and overpowered him. Simeon immediately stopped all boxing activities. The boys had turned their boxing skills against the sponsor.

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Just as any other parents, we had to learn from our mistakes and profit from our experiences.

### KAYANJA

Kayanja's father was not really a beggar, though he lived like one; he was a madman, exhibiting many obvious signs of mental illness. He carried his two sons wherever he went, the older one on his back and the younger one, Kayanja, on his shoulders. I first sighted Kayanja's father in 1979 in the slums along the Nakivubo Channel.

This man would make his rounds along Kampala Road, carrying his two sons. In the evenings, he would retire and find shelter on a veranda somewhere. He would gather some sticks to cook food in some old container that he had picked up during the day. He would feed the paltry meal to his children, and they would fall asleep, resting for another day of meaningless wandering.

I first met this man one afternoon in 1979 as I was traveling to Rohana to see the children. I was walking with my chief Tanzanian escort. We had learned early on that walking was far better than risking travel in a hired vehicle. The drivers' daredevil antics were enough to persuade anyone of the joys of walking. The rundown condition of the cars, the scarcity of spare parts, and the bald tires almost always guaranteed a breakdown. As we approached the Nakivubo Channel, we noticed a madman collecting dry leaves and paper and putting them on the dead body of a child. We stopped for a moment and watched this strange scenario for a moment. Others passing by seemed almost unconcerned, as they had become calloused to the heartaches of life.

We stayed at Rohana until four o'clock. As we were returning to the hotel, we reached the same spot where we had watched the madman. The dead body was now under the heap of leaves and papers. We looked on in shock as the man set the pile on fire. As we walked away, we cringed at the laughter of others who watched mockingly. The madman ignored their scorn, standing motionless and stern and watching the child's body go up in flames. Perhaps he was not the madman at all but the most serious-minded human around.

I saw this man almost two years later while I was addressing the city beggars near the old bus park. He was still carrying his two children. That day I had the chance to talk to him. I needed to establish some kind of

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rapport with him before broaching the important business that I had to present to him. I wanted him to surrender his children to me willingly and gratefully. I greeted him warmly and complimented him for something I had seen him do several years earlier. Unfortunately, he paid no attention to me, and my efforts were futile.

I met him another time just outside the defunct bookstore near Constitutional Square. The young son, Kayanja, seemed to recognize me, for I could read a hint of familiarity through his wary smile. I commented to the father that the two children must be too heavy to carry and that I would be happy to relieve him by carrying the younger one. He smartly answered in the vernacular, "*Enjovu teremererwa masanga gayo*," "An elephant will never find its tusks heavy." He meant that his sons were as precious to him as tusks are to the elephant. In return, I told him with a smile, "You win."

Not long after our encounter, the man wandered into the workshop on Kampala Road that had been allocated for the beggars to use as their handicraft shop. He came in to beg for money for something to eat. I gave him a friendly greeting, and he recognized me this time. I reminded him of our conversation outside the bookshop. I said to him, "Now you are begging for money, but I begged to have your son." Amazingly, he bent and lowered his son from his shoulders. "You take him," he offered. I quickly pulled out a ten thousand note and said to him, "Take it."

We agreed that he was free to visit his son at Rohana any time, but that was the last I ever saw of him. Not many days after, a speeding car ran him down, and he and his other son were killed instantly. What a terrible shock it was to us!

Despite his rocky beginnings in life, Kayanja adjusted quickly to our loving family environment and performed well in school. He came to know Jesus Christ as his Savior and grew into a committed servant of God. He completed his studies at Westminster Bible College, Zana, and is now pastoring a church at Munyonyo. Truly he can say with the psalmist:

He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay,  
and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he  
hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many  
shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD. (Ps 40:3)