Adventist World Radio

Feature Article

**“We’re Not Meeting Under a Mango Tree!”**

 To be a woman in Africa, I was told, you must be strong. Not just the strength needed to handle the obvious tasks of carrying children on your back, balancing 5-gallon water containers on your head for the long walk home, cooking over an open fire, or keeping your family’s clothes immaculately clean amid ever-present clouds of red dust. But rather, the tenacity that’s required to have a vision and make it happen.

 At first glance, Martha Kasoi Ndulu and her daughter, Esther, seemed quiet and a bit shy … somewhat unlikely examples of such drive. But then I heard their story.

 I met them a few months ago in Nzantani town, on a trip to meet AWR listeners in central Kenya. Esther was the first to begin listening to the Adventist radio station, Wikwatyo FM, located a considerable distance away in the small city of Kitui. From the very beginning, she took notes on every program, along with the questions she had about the topics. She was happy to show me her stack of notebooks, going back to 2009.

Esther soon told her mother about the programs, and they both continued listening. When the station manager, Pastor Silas Kioko, came to their area, Martha and Esther gathered their whole village to meet with him. They were leaders in their local Sunday-keeping church, and they sternly questioned the pastor about the points they disagreed with. The pastor was used to such energetic interaction and remained unflustered.

Although Esther only had a primary school education, she was in the habit of summarizing each radio program and sharing the information with people around her. She and many others began studying Voice of Prophecy Bible lessons. The people who asked the hardest questions turned out to be the ones who decided to be baptized. After only two months, 94 people joined the Adventist church, including Martha and Esther. The conference purchased land a short distance from the ladies’ home and made plans to put up a church building.

But Martha said, “Hmmm, five kilometers away? How will I make it? I’m not good with motorbikes, and at my age I can’t walk far. But let’s see what the Lord can do.” So she began to pray.

A while later, Martha again thought to herself: “I’m a widow, I have given my life to the Lord, I have joined the Adventist church, and they have bought land five kilometers away. But I may not make it there regularly because of my age, my health. What can I do?”

So she told God, “Lord, I’m praying. I don’t know what you want me to do, but I just feel I have a burden.”

Martha had had two sons, but one had died, and the other one had disappeared and never been traced, so she was living at home alone with Esther. She did have land, however, so she felt impressed to give part of it for a church.

But then her thoughts shifted. She told God, “No, I’m not going to do it. You know I lost one son, and I have no idea where my other one is.” However, every time she said no, she heard a voice, again and again.

Finally one morning, Martha woke up and said, “Ok, Lord, I’ll walk around my piece of land, and you’ll show me which part you want me to give you, because I don’t know.” So she started pacing around her small farm. Her neighbor saw her, and also saw that she was troubled. He said, “What is it? What are you looking for?” Martha told him, and kept walking. She said, “Lord, just show me! I’m so disturbed, I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I don’t know what’s happening.” Then she heard a voice: “Here.” She wanted the voice to repeat the message, but it didn’t come again.

Martha quickly grabbed her phone and called Pastor Kioko: “I want you to come now!”

“Are you sick? What’s happening?” he asked.

“Pastor, just come!”

So the pastor drove 60 kilometers on bad roads until he got to Martha’s house. She said, “I just want to tell you, I’m going to give a piece of my land here. I’d like to be paid only 100,000 shillings [$982]. But I’ll just keep 90,000, and the other 10,000 will be for tithe.”

But then Martha added some conditions: “We had better start thinking about building right away. I am moving from an established [Sunday] church, with a permanent structure, and you want people to meet outdoors under a tree? I don’t want to embarrass this new church I have come to. People in my community would not like to sit and worship under a mango tree for too long.” She knew that if visitors had to keep meeting under the mango tree, they would soon leave, saying what a shame it was that the Adventists could not offer their people something better.

“I’m not going to be embarrassed,” Martha said. So she kept calling the conference president and said to the church leaders, “If you are not doing it, I’m going to build this church myself.”

As I listened to the story unfold, the East Kenya Union Conference communication director, Catherine Nyameino, told me, “You have to understand: in the African context, decisions are made by men. But here was this lady and her daughter, being very firm.”

The conference finally decided to proceed with building the church, but soon a problem arose. The pastor for the district had been feeling a bit lonely in this corner of the country, so he left for another town. Martha said to the church leaders, “Look here, your pastor has left us like orphans. He’s not even here to supervise the construction. So I’m doing it.”

That’s how Martha became the project foreman and singlehandedly supervised the entire project. She even spent some of her own savings – another 100,000 shillings – so that the work wouldn’t stop. (The conference did refund her money.)

At the time of my visit, the structure was complete, but there were still a few unfinished details. Of course, Martha was once again standing firm: “There are no floor tiles yet, so I’m not taking possession of the building. I want a church with tiles, with beautiful plastic chairs, with lighting. There are many, many people who are just waiting for the church to be complete, and they will come.”

Esther continues to be an active witness, distributing Bible lessons in the area, and collecting and marking them. Church leaders have talked to her about possibly going back to school and becoming a literature evangelist.

 After we toured the church building, took photos under the mango tree – which was actually a very majestic specimen – and thanked Martha and Esther for their hospitality, we drove off into the twilight.

After a few kilometers, Nyameino said thoughtfully, “Could I listen to the radio and make such a significant decision that would affect my life? But Martha did it, and today she’s about to open a church with her daughter.”

by Shelley Nolan Freesland

Communication Director

pull quotes:

- “I don’t want to embarrass this new church I have come to.”

- “In the African context, decisions are made by men.”

- “Lord, I’m praying. I don’t know what you want me to do.”

photos provided