

Crosslight



Publication of the year

No. 266 June 2016



From Mooroolbark to Kampala

DEB BENNETT

IN the early morning hours of 27 April 1996, a weary Australian educator and a disheartened social worker from Africa met at the breakfast bar of a café on 500 West Broadway, San Diego. Their meeting was not chosen by either of them: it was random, unexpected and unscripted. When the educator entered the café, the stool beside the African was the only vacant place in the room.

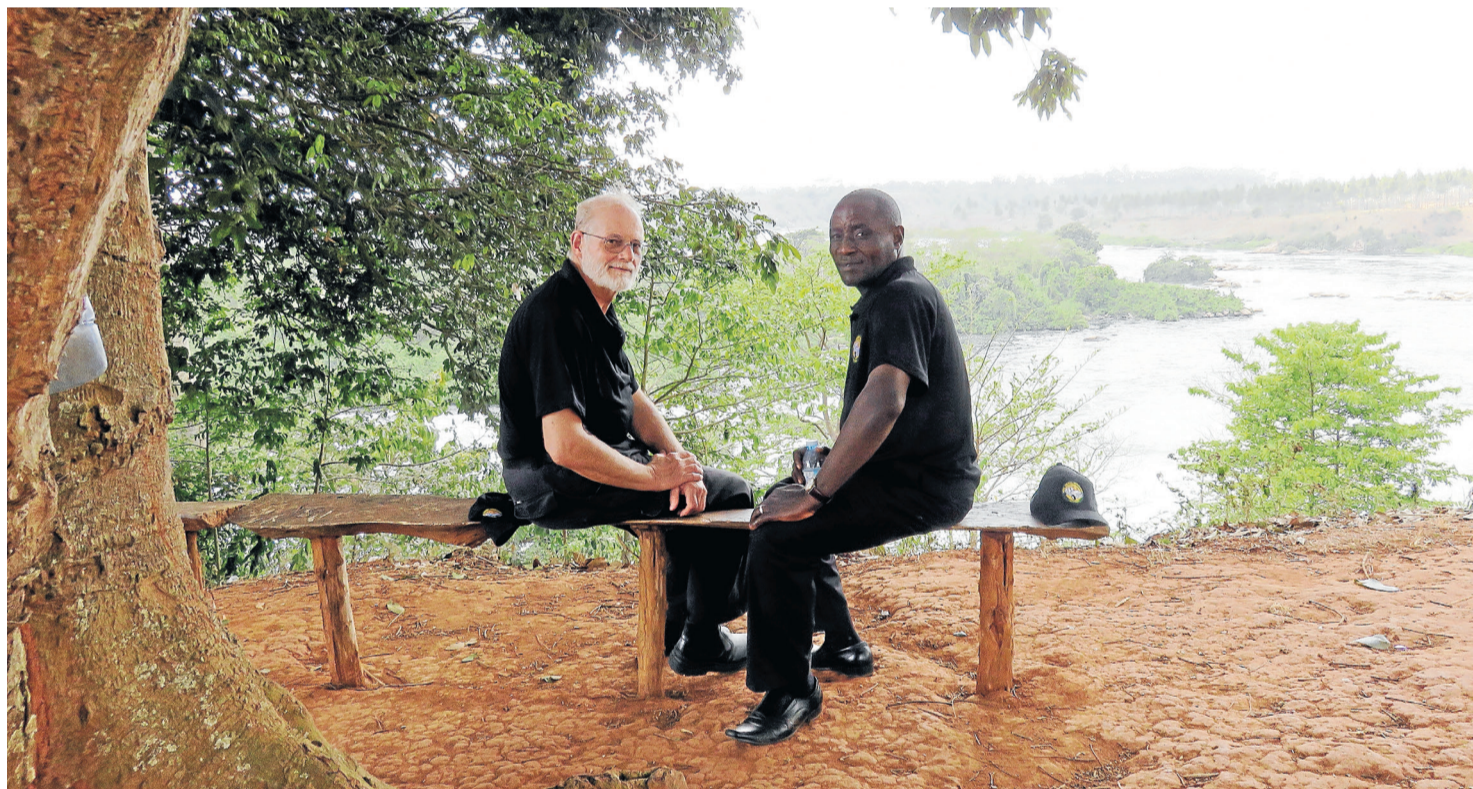
Geoffrey asked the Australian to pass the salt; Douglas broke his resolve to keep to himself, eat quickly and get out of there. They struck up a conversation that would profoundly impact both their lives.

The story of this chance encounter between Doug Williams and Geoffrey Kyeyune will be familiar to many readers of *Crosslight*. As the two travellers chatted over breakfast, Geoffrey shared his story of working with the street children in the Kampala District of Uganda. Doug listened intently as Geoffrey discussed the challenges of providing opportunities for some of the world's poorest children. He left the meeting knowing that he could do something to help.

A member of St Margaret's Uniting Church in Mooroolbark, Doug returned home and, with the encouragement of his minister, Rev Lesley Shekleton, shared the story of his meeting with his congregation. Two decades later, the consequences of that short conversation in San Diego continue to be integral to both the spiritual life and outreach of the small church in the hills outside of Melbourne and the African success story that is Rubaga Youth Development Association (RYDA).

"Since I first shared the story, I have been endlessly stunned at the growth of RYDA's support community," Doug said.

"In Australia, the numerous and varied fundraising activities over 20 years have caught the attention of many generous people and organisations beyond St Margaret's. Gifts have arrived from folk who respond because they have read an



Geoffrey Kyeyune and Doug Williams beside the Nile River

article in *Crosslight*, or because they have a friend or family member who attends St Margaret's, or because their organisation has invited our guest speaker to present. Every single cent ever given has been transferred to RYDA to continue their amazing work with the vulnerable youth, women and children of Uganda." RYDA's principal aim is to empower the poor and disadvantaged of Uganda, especially women and children, by assisting them to increase their socio-economic independence. In particular, RYDA seeks to increase life skills, opportunity, education and vocational training to help put an end to child labour.

While the support of St Margaret's has been integral to the success of RYDA, in April this year several members of the congregation reflected on what this commitment has meant to them. Stephen White said that hearing Geoffrey speak was the reason he and his wife joined the St Margaret's congregation.

"In the '90s, Karen and I were looking for a church," Mr White said. "Karen gave St Margaret's a try and convinced me that this

could be the one for us, so I came along. It happened to be a morning RYDA's founder, Geoffrey Kyeyune, was visiting from Kampala. I was so impressed with his story and the congregation's support for RYDA's work that I have been here ever since." Marj Hookey has been church treasurer for the past 20 years. She said St Margaret's involvement with RYDA has shown church members what real mission giving means. "It is a bold and breathtaking story of a visionary leader changing the lives of orphaned and vulnerable street youth in Uganda," she said. For Joyce Dodge, whose family were early settlers of Mooroolbark, the good thing about supporting RYDA is the continuity. "It is an organisation where God is at work." Fellow member Yvonne Spicer expanded: "It never ceases to amaze me how the Holy Spirit has worked, and continues to work, through us and RYDA – how everything falls into place."

Current minister, Rev Arnie Wierenga, has run multiple marathons to raise funds for RYDA. He agreed with Yvonne. "I am constantly amazed at how much can be

achieved with almost nothing and a little faith." Mr Wierenga said.

A public display and timeline was displayed in the church to commemorate the 20-year anniversary. Doug said that while many would see the relationship as helping the people of Kampala, it is the benefit to St Margaret's that has been most profound. "Amazement is the dominant theme in the display," Doug said.

"Not amazement with what we have achieved, rather amazement at what the Spirit has achieved with us, even when we thought we had nothing to give. And with what the Spirit has achieved through the energy and enterprise of the staff and children at RYDA."

Geoffrey read Doug's regular online update and sent a simple email to his friend in response:

"The website has reminded me that we are 20 years older. At the time I was 33 years, now am 53 years. God has guided us well that we have saved lives."

For more information on the work of RYDA go to: blackdouglas.com.au/ryda