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The Disturbances



The Disturbances

The Untold Story of How Missionaries Saved Lives in a Time of Tribal Genocide

Robert Parham



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Cover image: Southern Baptist missionary Bob Parham comforts a Nigerian girl during the Jos airlift in 1966. Photo courtesy: SIM International Archives.

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A number of missionaries and missionary children (now middle-aged adults) trusted us with their memories, correspondence, diaries, photographs and film footage. While we did video interviews with some 25 missionaries and missionary children, we communicated with a much larger number. We found open hearts and an eagerness to share their experiences. Their collaboration ensured that we got the story right.

Neither the book nor the documentary would have been possible without the diligent work of Cliff Vaughn. He probed deeply into archival material,

catalogued video interviews, meticulously checked facts, stitched together a clear narrative and managed the documentary's production. The book followed most of the film script that he wrote.

Zach Dawes read and re-read chapters, improving the quality of the story telling. Michael Leathers proofread the manuscript, making it as error free as humanly possible. Jake Moore and Alayna Hudson, our summer interns, added their insight to the manuscript.

“The Disturbances,” the book, goes into much more depth than is possible in the documentary. More accounts are recorded, richer historical details are added, and greater contextual color is provided.

We hope our book and documentary will bring to light one of the most compelling missionary contributions in the 20th century.

All royalties from the sale of this book go to the Baptist Center for Ethics, a 501(c)(3) organization. Proceeds will enable the Baptist Center for Ethics, better known through its website as EthicsDaily.com, to continue its public witness and work for the advancement of the common good.

Robert Parham



Preface

Three fragmentary childhood memories, cryptic family correspondence and a handful of photographs gave birth to two years of meticulous research into what happened in Nigeria in 1966.

The first memory was a man rushing into my seventh-grade classroom at an interdenominational mission school in Jos. The second was seeing villagers carrying on their heads electrical items—record players and fans—into a village without electricity. The third was hearing, at a police station on a Sunday afternoon, an unexpected biblical admonition.

The cryptic family correspondence included a letter from a ranking member of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to my mother's parents. He assured them that there was “no cause for alarm.” He simply referred to what was going on in Nigeria as “the disturbances.”

In a letter to this executive a week later, my father wrote about “mass killings of Ibos by northerners.” He spoke of counting dead bodies in the town. He said that they had heard of hundreds of bodies in the morgue. He added, “All that has happened during those few days cannot be given in this letter.”

The handful of black-and-white photographs included frames of my father directing activities at the Jos airport. One showed him speaking to a crying Nigerian woman on a stretcher.

My family never discussed what happened during those days in Jos. My father never shared what he saw when he drove through our town or what he did during an evacuation airlift. Never. Not even years later, long after I was an adult.

For years, I've wanted to know the full story. I knew that something awful had happened. I knew that members of one tribe had formed gangs that generally hunted and butchered members of another tribe. That was about all I really knew.

I raised the question with my colleague, Cliff Vaughn, about whether we could find sufficient material to do a documentary on this story. We had a successful record of producing documentaries on a variety of issues. These documentaries had aired on TV and been widely viewed in churches.

I wondered if we—EthicsDaily.com—would be able to stitch something together. What was the full story surrounding these three items? Were there other accounts? Had any books been written on what had happened in Jos? What about articles? Did the few living Nigerian missionaries have their own experiences? Could they remember them? Would they share them on camera? Did other photographs exist? What about correspondence similar to my family's letters?

We soon discovered that few publicly available books had been written on the subject—and those were about the politics of the events. None developed the story of what missionaries had witnessed and done. With few exceptions, missionaries hadn't written about it. They didn't talk about it at their reunions. Their children didn't discuss it. As a result, their story had slipped into the ether.

We wondered why—why was there so much silence about what had happened?

Cliff and I dug into the story. We searched for books and articles. We made cold calls. We spoke with missionaries. We posted messages on Facebook and followed leads. I called classmates with whom I had not spoken in decades. The more we pressed, the more we found. The more we found, the more we knew this untold story demanded telling.

For the first time in 50 years, a host of missionaries and missionary children are speaking publicly—eagerly.

A few eyewitnesses still think it imprudent to speak openly about what happened in 1966. They suggest that it is too dangerous for missionaries and Nigerians, especially given the terrorism of Boko Haram. One missionary pilot declined to speak on the record, although he shared valuable details. A missionary child, now an adult, wondered why we would now want to record the accounts of what happened.

The vast majority of eyewitnesses, however, weighed the balance. They decided to embrace the wisdom found in Ecclesiastes: “For everything there is a season ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

These missionary and missionary children eyewitnesses showed courage in 1966 and again by speaking of encounters long buried. Some showed emotion in recalling the events. All readily shared with us items that had been stored away for years—correspondence, diaries, memos, photographs and film footage. One even gave us a notebook in shorthand chronicling a critical meeting. They recommended others to call. Nigerians, too, shared what they experienced—and encouraged the project. Many sat through long video interviews.

We obtained over 2,500 photographs, rolls of 8mm and 16mm film footage, a mountain of documents. We had scores of conversations. We conducted 25 video interviews.

Cliff and I have wondered if today's church has the courage to hear their gritty stories, even to consider that some missionaries struggled to reconcile how brother could have killed brother given the longstanding endeavor of Christian missionaries to promote brotherhood among diverse tribal or ethnic groups.

We hope the Christian community will come to a deeper understanding of missionaries, who are, as outsiders, vulnerable to national events and disposed to feel responsible for the most vulnerable around them. Nothing could have prepared these men and women for what they encountered and how they reacted. Yet they did so wisely and at great risk because it was the right thing to do.

We also hope the Christian community will arrive at a more informed understanding of genocide. Genocide is rooted in prejudice, deliberately planned and executed, and designed to eliminate a group of people based on their ethnicity, race or religion. It is not spontaneous or random. It's organized, plotted, brutal.

It happens over and over again. After each genocidal episode, governmental and international leaders pledge "never again." But the pledge is seldom kept. And few leaders of genocide are ever prosecuted. Surely, it is time for the Christian community to determine that it must serve as "watchmen on the gate."

The title for our documentary and this accompanying book is "The Disturbances." The choice of the title and the strange squiggly line will become clear later on.

For now, read this untold story. Be warned, it contains graphic details. Yet it's an incredible story about ruin and redemption, rumor and reaction, blood and boldness, denial and dedication, guilt and goodness.



Introduction

This is a true story kept quiet by missionaries, unknown to church members, unmentioned in the list of genocides over the past 50 years.

Yet it deserves a place in the histories of human atrocities and the chronicles of Christian history. We need to remember both the capacity for planned and executed human evil, as well as the potential for calculated and courageous human goodness.

For the sake of this story, we begin six years after Nigeria was granted independence from Great Britain in 1960. One could rightly critique European colonialism and the 1884 Berlin conference that haphazardly carved up sub-Saharan Africa. They ignored tribal boundaries. They overlooked historical and religious relationships. They disregarded linguistic regions. That history is well documented. That field has been abundantly plowed. Additionally, the steady negative drumbeat about the missionary enterprise is well known. We have no intention to join the scrum over colonialism and missions.

Less well known is what happened when Nigerian military officers toppled in January 1966 the elected leadership of “Africa’s giant.” Tribal tensions immediately re-emerged. Most of the coup d’etat military officers were members of the Igbo tribe. Those assassinated included ranking members of the Hausa tribe.

Max Siollun, in his book, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, puts it this way: “The overwhelming majority of the January plotters were Igbo, most of their victims were non-Igbo.”

Igbo civilians were then killed in late May in northern Nigeria, where Hausas predominantly lived, reportedly out of revenge and displeasure over a new government decree. The decree limited regional power, something Northerners opposed. A second coup occurred in July. It replaced the country’s supreme commander, who was an Igbo, with a member of a northern tribe. In September, widespread genocide was launched. An estimated 30,000 Igbos would be massacred over the course of a few days in 1966. Of course, no one knows the exact count.

Hundreds of thousands of Igbos would flee to the Eastern Region of Nigeria, their traditional homeland, even though many had been born and raised in the Northern Region, the Hausa homeland.

The atrocities triggered the Eastern Region to withdraw from the federal government of Nigeria. A brutal three-year civil war was fought, known as the Biafran War. An estimated 1.5 million Easterners would die, mostly from starvation.

Southern Baptist missionary Bryant Durham remained in Biafra throughout the war as a leader of the Christian humanitarian relief effort. He would write in his dissertation at the University of Georgia a few years later that 3,000 to 4,000 civilian deaths occurred every day between August and October 1968. By November 1969, the daily death toll had dropped to 1,000 to 2,000. The numbers are staggering.

Nigerian historian Godfrey Uzoigwe, an Igbo with a doctor of philosophy degree from Oxford University, has written that the Igbo genocide “dwarfed the Congolese killings of the early 1960s, the Tutsi genocide of the early 1990s and the more recent Darfur genocide, in its hatred, planning, intensity, ferocity, barbarity and the number of people killed or affected. But genocide scholars have totally ignored it.”

Sadly, the church doesn’t know what missionaries did to save lives during these brutal days in 1966. Aside from private correspondence, minutes, fragmentary references in newspaper articles, and brief notes in a few books, their story is unrecorded.

“The Disturbances” is their story.

Speaking at a Jewish Heritage Week in April 1985, President Ronald Reagan presented the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel. He noted that the American people had pledged after the Holocaust: “Never again.”

“To say ‘never again,’ however, is not enough,” said Reagan. “[O]ur pledge was more than ‘Never again.’ It was also, ‘Never forget.’”

Yet Reagan stood by as Guatemala’s president committed genocide against his own indigenous people.

President George H. W. Bush remained inactive as Serbia sought to ethnically cleanse Bosnia.

President Bill Clinton said at the Holocaust Memorial Museum that the United States must never permit such an event again. Yet he stood by while hundreds of thousands of Tutsis were slaughtered in Rwanda.

President George W. Bush declared in 2004 at the Holocaust Memorial Museum about Darfur: “It is evil we are now seeing in Sudan – and we’re not going to back down.”

Many argue that the targeting of Christians in the Middle East, Syria in particular, by ISIS is genocide. Yet President Barack Obama has skirted the word.

“Never again” rings hollow. Genocide continues. It does so perhaps because perpetrators have learned that Western governments and the international community are reluctant to intervene. Perpetrators may believe that they will go unpunished.

In a world of genocide, the global church’s task is both to be a watchman on the gate to warn of genocide and to press governments and international bodies to intervene.

While our story is set in the midst of the Nigerian genocide, it is not primarily about genocide, the politics of tribal targeting, or even the root causes.

No, our work is really about missionaries and their children—what they witnessed and did to save lives. We chronicle stories of how missionaries hid Igbos at great personal risk from roving Hausa gangs with machetes, how they transported Igbos across dangerous ground to safety. We recall how missionary children—high school students—tended to the wounds of butchered victims and sang hymns to those who died in their arms. We explore rescue stories: with endings still unresolved, others with tearful remains. We tell stories of redemption.

“The Disturbances” is both horrifying and inspiring.

Chapter 1



Arrival of Missionaries, Birth of a Nation

The first Christian missionaries to Nigeria were Portuguese monks, arriving in the territory that became Nigeria in the 15th century.

In 1842, Anglican clergyman Henry Townsend, with the Church Missionary Society, began sowing the seeds of Christianity in West Africa. He and a Yoruba ex-slave, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, settled in Abeokuta, a city in the Yoruba tribal homeland, in Nigeria’s southwest.

Thomas Jefferson Bowen, from the State of Georgia, soon followed. He arrived in Nigeria in 1850 as a Southern Baptist missionary, only five years after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. He, too, put down roots in the homeland of the Yoruba tribe. He learned the Yoruba language and even published a Yoruba grammar. He baptized his first convert in 1854.

The harsh conditions in Nigeria—tribal conflict, the slave trade, and health challenges—made mission work hard. From Bowen’s arrival until 1890, few missionaries were appointed to what was known as the “white man’s graveyard.”