



# Servant of Christ, Leader of the Church: David Windibiziri

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**T**he account of mission history has often left gaps and spaces in both the written and oral history of the church in Africa. When missionaries recorded their stories, they tended to present them from their own point of view. This meant that indigenous history was often left out. As Frederick Quinn has observed, “Conventional wisdom tied the spread of Christianity in Africa to Western missionary-driven initiatives.”<sup>1</sup> But even so, the fact remains that “church growth was always the result of African Christians converting other Africans.”<sup>2</sup>

The result of this one-sided approach to African history is that when we write history from a non-Western perspective we have to qualify such accounts and often footnote Western sources for them to seem authentic. The following story is that of a servant of God told from a non-Western perspective, a man who qualifies in terms of his own culture as a servant of Christ and a leader in the church of Christ.

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

David Lonkibiri Windibiziri was born in 1934 in Purokayo, Guyuk Local

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Quinn, *African Saints* (New York: Crossroad, 2002) 4.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

*The church's calendar of saints has been dominated by figures of the West and of the past. We need now to hear stories of holy men and women from other cultures and from our own time.*

Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria. As a young boy he grew up with a brother, Umaru Zalmadai, and a sister, Sintiki. His father, Windibiziri, was a horse rider and hunter, and the young David grew up doing what he saw his father do.

At the age of twenty-one, David married Zufa Hassan, with whom he was blessed with six children. Their marriage was filled with joy and mutual love for one another, a shining example of what a Christian marriage can be.

Even though his parents were traditionalists, David was allowed to attend the mission school in Guyuk before proceeding to Numan, where he completed his primary education. From Numan he proceeded to Yola, where he attended the School of Agriculture in Kofare, and then to the School of Agriculture in Zaria. Later he also went to the School of Accountancy, again in Zaria.

After completing his education, he was employed by the then Native Authority. There his hard work earned him the privilege of attending several additional courses.

#### EMPLOYMENT IN THE NATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE CALL TO MINISTRY

Like most early Christians in Nigeria, David Windibiziri saw his service in the Native Authority as a challenge as well as an opportunity. It was a challenge, because his Christian testimony would be tested in the face of real-life situations. But it was also an opportunity, because it was a major opportunity to show that he was now a member of a new faith.

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Most missionaries working in Northern Nigeria had a dualistic attitude that separated the world into the sacred and the secular. This way of thinking became a problem to many of the new Christians and made it difficult to live the Christian life in their everyday affairs and in their work. This challenge has continued to this day without solution, and the result is that most Christians continue to live such dualistic lives.

Windibiziri was faced with the difficult decision of whether to continue in the Native Authority, which seemed to offer a certain future, or to relinquish his job in favor of serving the church. Finally, he decided to leave his work and to proceed for theological training. The greatest challenge was how to fund this new venture. In answer to prayer, the friend of a missionary, a retired teacher in Denmark, agreed to pay his tuition as well as living expenses. Windibiziri saw this as a confirmation that God was really calling him to Christian ministry. With this determination and the understanding that God was calling him, Windibiziri left work with the Native Authority and went to the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) in 1967. He completed his studies in 1970 and was ordained in 1972. With his ordination his long path of Christian service began, in which he was not only a leader, but

a servant leader as well. It is these two distinguishing qualities, of being both a leader and a servant, that we shall return to as we consider his life and his ministry. His ministry demonstrates outstanding challenges for which he had to make decisions, some of which led to crises, some of which led to growth.

#### FROM OBSCURITY TO PROMINENCE

Although Windibiziri has had a long career with the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), his various places of ministry could not be said to be outstanding or even prominent. He worked as a district pastor in Jos for six years, after which he was invited by his people to serve as councilor in the newly created Guyuk Local Government. Because this was announced publicly before he was asked, he felt bound to accept the call. But he found it difficult because, as he said, "I saw this as a temptation to leave my work as a pastor."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, although Windibiziri was asked to stay on after his term had ended, he decided to return to his primary task as a shepherd.

Windibiziri was asked by the LCCN to serve as secretary to Akila Todi, who was the bishop at the time. He held this position until he left for further studies in the United States in 1983, doubling as secretary to the bishop as well as administrative secretary of the church for part of this time.

When Windibiziri returned home from the States, the LCCN asked him to be its first pastor for the new Abuja area. There he not only organized the work among our LCCN members who had moved to the new Federal Capital Territory, but he also discovered a great number of unreached people in the area. This led to the development of an outreach ministry in Abuja and Kontagora.

#### CALL, INSTALLATION, AND CONSECRATION AS BISHOP

Windibiziri is from the Longuda tribe. The Longuda were among the first major tribal groups (after the Bachama) who were attracted to the gospel when the Danish Sudan United Mission came in 1913. However, in the late 1960s, the Longuda people left the LCCN en masse and joined the Baptist church in protest over certain issues in LCCN. There continued to be a small Lutheran presence among the Longuda, but they could not be considered a significant group politically. It was thus a great surprise to everyone when Windibiziri, a Longuda, emerged a bishop.

David Windibiziri was consecrated as bishop on February 22, 1987, thus becoming the second bishop of the LCCN. From his installation as bishop, Windibiziri showed himself to be a visionary leader. He took steps to bring about changes in the life of the church that he saw necessary to place it on a sound footing. His clear vision was evident throughout his tenure of fifteen years as bishop and archbishop.

<sup>3</sup>David Windibiziri, personal interview by the author, January 15, 2008.

In contrast to his predecessor, many would consider Windibiziri progressive. His goal was not merely to maintain the status quo, but to achieve something new. The following areas reflect the ideas and goals he pursued during his term as bishop and archbishop of the LCCN.

#### YOUTH AND GENDER SENSITIVITY

Even though women have played a very critical role in the LCCN for many years, they have not been accorded the privileges and attention they deserve. At best, they were there to listen and to be preached to. The theological orientation of the first missionaries impeded any significant involvement in the church by women and youth, so it was very difficult to change things. As a result, it was not just the youth who found things difficult, but also women and others who wanted change. In comparing the theological outlook of Akila Todi, the first bishop, and Windibiziri, Musa Gaiya points out that the first bishop “was very conservative in his theology. For example, he opposed the ordination of women and dancing during worship. According to him, dancing in God’s house was a sin.”<sup>4</sup>

Windibiziri, however, was gender sensitive. He pursued the issue of women and youth representation in the church. This perspective was not new to Windibiziri’s theological framework; indeed it had become an important agenda of the LWF for sister churches. Still, it is evident that not all churches achieved it. Windibiziri pursued the program vigorously. The issue was critical, for many youth had become discouraged and left the church. Windibiziri now persuaded the young people to remain and to find ways in which they could inform and influence the church. He always reminded them that Martin Luther did not run away from the church, but remained to reform it—at least until he was excommunicated.

Windibiziri’s previous training in agriculture made him give attention to tree planting, and he established the Agro-Forestry Department of LCCN, an effort that coincided with the overall plan of the Lutheran World Federation at the time. Windibiziri was able to get support from the Lutheran World body for this tree planting campaign, but unfortunately it did not find support from the grassroots.

#### INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Windibiziri tried to plough new ground in as many ways as possible. In addition to his concern for women and youth, he tried to find ways for improved relationships with Muslims. This did not occur in a vacuum, but was done against the religious tension of the time. The 1980s were years of religious crises in Northern Nigeria, in which Muslims and Christians were engaged in serious religious conflict. These religious crises were triggered by both local and national events. There was the issue of membership in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), in which Nigeria had for many years been an observer, but now became a

<sup>4</sup>Musa Gaiya, at [http://www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/todi\\_akila.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/todi_akila.html) (accessed 1 May 2008).

regular member in 1987. Further conflict was fueled by the desire of some Muslims, especially in the north, to establish Islamic shari'a as the country's legal system.

These issues combined to make the already volatile nature of relationships between Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria very difficult. The modern missionary movement coming from the West had envisioned only one kind of encounter between these religious groups, namely, conversion of Muslims to Christian faith. This was represented in Northern Nigeria by the founding missionaries of the LCCN from the Sudan United Mission, a group with pietistic leanings.<sup>5</sup> The indigenous churches were left with this legacy, according to which religious conversion of Muslims was a necessary task.<sup>6</sup>

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Without giving up the idea of evangelical outreach, Windibiziri saw new possibilities for a proposed Christian Muslim Center. Of the new encounter with Muslims, he wrote:

We soon found that although we have been living together as neighbors for many years there is considerable ignorance about one another and our faiths. It has therefore been very much a learning period. We have been able to analyze our situation and background and already at the first conference we remarked that most of the causes for crises and confrontations were not basically religious, but based on historical, political, social and economic issues.<sup>7</sup>

The learning that has taken place and the interaction between Muslims and Christians have helped to further relationships between the two faith communities.

This achievement did not come easily, and has received heavy criticisms. The ongoing tensions were illustrated when the youth fellowship told the archbishop that while he was busy trying to foster good relationships with Muslims, he would one day wake up to find that his church had been burnt to ashes and that he had no members to follow him!

#### POLITICS AND PUBLIC ISSUES

The early conservative missionaries allowed their converts neither to participate in politics nor to be involved in profit-making ventures. Contracts were forbidden for those who were to be considered good church members. This made most LCCN members see a dichotomy between their Christian life and their in-

<sup>5</sup>Mogens Jensen, *Two Men and Their Mission* (Christiansfeld, Denmark: Forlaget Savanne, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>For detailed discussion of this subject, see Edward Patrick Thurman Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria* (Zaria, Nigeria: Gaskiya, 1975).

<sup>7</sup>David Windibiziri, "A Nigerian Experience," in *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2003) 159.

volvement in business or politics. At best, they could only vote, but they could not stand for election or be voted into office. Niels Kastfelt points out:

Some missionaries felt that Christians should stay out of politics...while others thought that Christian political involvement was positive, not because politics in itself was good, but because the church will benefit from Nigerian Christians being placed in influential political positions.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this confusion, even those who became pastors and leaders in the church did not have a clear idea of what needed to be done in the area of politics. They tried neither to patronize nor to befriend those who held political office. They saw this as a way to keep from being polluted with the things of this world.

Windibiziri, like his predecessor, had the privilege of holding political office. He served as councilor for Education and Social Welfare in his own local government from 1977 to 1979. The experience he gained during this involvement shaped his ministry in several ways. For one, unlike his missionary mentors, he gained firsthand knowledge of politics, with its strengths as well as its weaknesses. During his term as bishop and archbishop of the LCCN, he tried to encourage people to political participation, but like his missionary mentors, always from the point of view of being salt and light to the world. The collection of his speeches during his years as head of the church, *Reflections and Presentations 1987–2001*, makes clear the need always to be involved in politics. Yet the stigma of seeing politicians as corrupt has changed but very little.

## CHURCH PARTNERSHIP

In 1988, the ELCA reoriented its mission approach toward what was called “accompaniment.” This approach meant, among other things, that groups in the ELCA would seek to partner with congregations and synods in other parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> Windibiziri was able to contribute to this work significantly, as the Minneapolis area synod noted:

It so happened that the newly installed bishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, David Windibiziri, was a graduate of Luther Seminary, and his advisor David Olson was elected to be the bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod of the ELCA in 1989. In the following year church leaders from Minneapolis visited Nigeria and formalized their companion synod relations with the hopes of finding congregations that would be willing to participate in the companion congregation program.<sup>10</sup>

From that small beginning, these church relationships have grown, and at the

<sup>8</sup>Niels Kastfelt, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Study in Middle Belt Christianity* (London: British Academic Press, 1994) 121.

<sup>9</sup>For more on this ELCA accompaniment program, see <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Global-Mission/How-We-Work.aspx> (accessed 5 August 2008).

<sup>10</sup>Minneapolis Area Synod, Companion Synod Program, Lutheran Church of Christ, Nigeria, at [http://www.mpls-synod.org/companion\\_synods/nigeria.html](http://www.mpls-synod.org/companion_synods/nigeria.html) (accessed 1 May 2008).

moment the Minneapolis Area Synod has partnered with fourteen congregations with LCCN.<sup>11</sup> This can be attributed to the wise leadership and direct influence of David Windibiziri, who saw the need to pursue such an agenda.

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Windibiziri seemed to have understood the guiding principle in the ELCA paradigm shift well enough. He cautioned each of the LCCN congregations not to look to their overseas partners for support for building projects, but rather that together they were to partner in taking the gospel to the corners of the world.<sup>12</sup> This program has positively enhanced evangelism and mission in the LCCN as well.

#### CHARACTER TRAITS AND ATTRIBUTES OF A SERVANT LEADER

The statement about Windibiziri as a servant of the church may be greeted with different responses, since people saw him differently. Controversies in the church and tribal tensions were real. Still, Windibiziri was able to lead the church through two periods of constitutional amendment. He facilitated the adoption of a new constitution in 1988 and an amended one in 1995 that created the five dioceses—made necessary because of the phenomenal growth of the church. Windibiziri's wisdom and administrative skills have earned him respect and honor among his contemporaries as a great leader.

During the crises that bedeviled the LCCN, especially from 1994, which led to the splitting of the church into two factions, Windibiziri has shown unusual patience. Even in the face of open provocation he demonstrated quiet and patience, helping greatly to calm the crises. It is no wonder that he was nicknamed the man with unusual patience—"mugun hakuri," in the words of Thomas Mbulah.

Windibiziri is also a man of great humility. He is unassuming in his approach to both young and old. He does not take anything for granted. He has a temperament that appeals to all groups of people. He is a social man, quick to make friendships. His home has been a home to very many people.

Windibiziri has welcomed people irrespective of age or gender. He quickly expresses thanks for any work done for him, even that which is considered insignificant by others. Another example of his respect for others and for his dedication to his work is his rejection of the notion of "African time." He would always be at meetings ahead of the officially scheduled time. In an African setting, where the concept of time is very much relegated to the background, this was not easy. He

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>David Windibiziri, "A Helping Hand," City Congregations Project, BME Speech, March 1990.

would often say that those who keep to the appointed time will always suffer—that is, by waiting for the others—but he achieved a milestone through his own example.

He is not afraid of attempting anything new and difficult, which helps explain why he has been such a successful leader. The fear of the unknown will not stop him from trying what he believes is right. He attempts tasks and responsibility with great faith in God, and it is this unwavering faith that brought him from humble beginnings to his high office.

One event that showed his spiritual maturity was a fire that destroyed his house. Even though he was under stress and emotional shock, he was able to encourage even those who came to offer their condolences. Another such event occurred recently when his eldest son died. He said that if pastors, bishops, and leaders encourage others during the time of their loss, they cannot expect to be exempted from such trials themselves. Like others, he cried in tragedy, but he found time to encourage others as well.

When we think of saints we usually think of the West and of earlier times. Robert Elsberg observes, “The official calendar of the saints has long been weighted toward the West. But in this era of the ‘world church’ it is more important than ever to draw on the inspiration and challenge of holy people from other parts of the world.”<sup>13</sup> It is to these holy men and women from all cultures—including David Windibiziri—who have inspired and challenged us in our pilgrimage, that we must turn, not because they are sinless, but because, despite their sinfulness, they have inspired us to follow the Lamb. ☩

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Elsberg, on the back cover of Frederick Quinn, *African Saints*.