

# Transforming Lives in Uganda

This article has been condensed from a talk given at the Renewal Ministries Leadership Forum.

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I joined the Catholic Charismatic Renewal when I was eighteen. In those days, there were only a couple prayer groups in the country, so we did not have mentors. But then, a missionary priest gave one of our leaders an address for Renewal Ministries. He wrote to Ralph Martin and asked for support. Renewal Ministries furnished us with many books, tapes, and materials. We were in a deep jungle, with no town around, but those materials found us! One of them was *New Covenant Magazine*, which contained many testimonies. I prayed,

*“God, I want to be like these people. Let me not die before I go to America. I want to see Ralph Martin. I want to see Steve Clark, Peter Herbeck, and others. Lord, please, answer that prayer! I want to see Pope John Paul II. I want to see Mother Teresa. I want to see Fr. Tom Forrest.”*

I think God laughed after that list of about fifteen names and places!

In 1987, I was invited to Rome. Once there, I saw the pope, Mother Teresa, and Fr. Tom Forrest! In 1998, when Fr. Tom Forrest was in Rome heading Evangelization 2000, he sent an invitation to Uganda for two young people to attend a school of evangelization in Rome. Mysteriously, I was picked. It transformed my life. We were commissioned by the Holy Father himself at the end of the course and sent to Germany for pastoral outreach.

When I returned home, a German priest who had worked in Ghana for eighteen years had just been transferred to Uganda to help the charismatic renewal. I said, “Father, we need a school of evangelization right now!” It was expensive to send people to Rome, so I wanted Rome to come to Africa to help many young people know their faith. In Africa, formation stops after Christian initiation. There’s a big gap; many young Catholics are ignorant. We began the school with struggles and challenges, for the priest particularly, because the charismatic renewal was foreign.

I asked the German priest who worked with us if he could invite Renewal Ministries to Uganda, and he did. At first, they sent us speakers like Mary Beth Bonacci and others. They met some university students, which bore great fruit. I can’t tell you how many of those students are now priests or doctors—very fine, Catholic, Spirit-filled doctors.



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In 1999, the Year of the Father, we again invited Renewal Ministries to help with a priests’ retreat. That’s when the other half of my prayer was answered. Peter Herbeck, Sr. Ann Shields, Fr. Tom Forrest, Sr. Sarah Burdick, and Ralph Martin came for a retreat for 120 priests from East Africa and some friends from the western parts. About ten-thousand people also attended a National Conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. That really ushered in our collaboration with Renewal Ministries.

Peter Herbeck took me for a walk, and I asked if Renewal Ministries could help us build a chapel. He politely said,

*“We are not here to finance infrastructure. Think of strategic programs that are soul-searching. Renewal Ministries’ number-one mission is to save people from hell and populate heaven. Think of anything along those lines.”*

Afterward, Peter invited two of us to meet with Country Coordinator Randall Cirner to establish a strategy of how Renewal Ministries could help us. We developed a plan that focused on the formation of priests, youth leaders, sisters, lay people, and seminarians. Over the years, Renewal Ministries helped us grow those programs both through written materials and financial support.

Renewal Ministries has done so much. There are 2.5 million Sudanese refugees in Uganda. When we started going to the refugee camps, only one out of five-hundred people had a Bible. Each

week, people traveled by bicycle to share their Bible or copy the verses for Sunday. When Renewal Ministries came, they brought funds to distribute Bibles to the Sudanese refugees. You should have seen their joy! The refugees said,

*“You brought us the best gift. The UN brought us food, beans, and clothing. You brought us the best—the Word of God in our hearts.”*

Throughout the years, Renewal Ministries helped us run Life in the Spirit Seminars for priests and others. Then, in 2019, all the bishops of Africa came to Uganda for a conference. My bishop surprised my wife and I by sending us to the event. While there, we made an important discovery. More than once, a bishop asked me, “Where are you from?” And I responded, “Emmaus Center.” Then he said,

*“Oh, Emmaus Center! I was there when I was a priest. I did the Life in the Spirit Seminar, and I was so touched. My life changed. I never returned, because then I was sent to Rome and became a bishop. I wish that all the priests in my diocese would go through Life in the Spirit Seminars. It’s a life-transforming program.”*

We discovered that three bishops from Uganda and a bishop from Zimbabwe had been to Emmaus Center as priests. After praying, my wife and I felt God was opening a door, and we didn’t want to let it shut. We asked Renewal Ministries whether they could support Life in the Spirit Seminars for the priests in the dioceses of these bishops. Ralph and Peter said that if bishops were asking for this, it was a strategic investment, and we should go ahead. As a result, we had Life in the Spirit Seminars with ninety-seven priests.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. We would do the seminar in one diocese, and then the bishop would run to another diocese to tell that bishop how successful it was. And then the other bishop would come to me and say,

*“We also want this!”*



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We would bring the priests of that diocese to Emmaus Center as well, and then another diocese would say,

*“What about us?”*

So far, priests from nineteen dioceses have come to the Emmaus Center for Life in the Spirit Seminars. An additional sixteen dioceses have written to us with requests to offer the seminars to their priests because of the fruits they are seeing. Additionally, up to twelve priests who had left the priesthood completely have come back to serve the Lord.

In just the last two years, we have done Life in the Spirit Seminars for all the priests in eleven dioceses—more than 750 priests and seven bishops. A rector of a major seminary said to me,

*“This is a must for the seminarians. No seminarian should be ordained before going through this.”*

So, we wrote to Peter again to request additional support, which Renewal Ministries gladly gave us. As a result, 238 seminarians attended a seminar together with the seminary’s staff. The whole seminary is now on fire!

I recently reflected on Peter’s statement about Renewal Ministries spending its funds on strategic investments. How true that was! From the seminarians, we have priests on fire. From those priests, we have bishops on fire. And if we have bishops who are on fire, then the Church is going to be different.

I would like to share a statement from Bishop Joseph Eciru Oliach, of the Soroti Diocese. All his priests have gone through Life in the Spirit Seminars:

We just concluded our Life in the Spirit Seminar, made possible by your generous support. It was a fantastic encounter with the Lord. The priests’ testimonies speak for themselves. Each of them has personally encountered the Lord. It was an experience like the one shared by the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Peter feels that they should stay longer. . . .

As the shepherd of this diocese, it is my hope and belief that the priests and seminarians who have experienced the Lord personally will in turn enrich their respective communities and live lives of witness. Indeed, their experience, their testimonies, were marvelous. I am now thinking of how to cascade this program to other Church leaders. I am thinking of our two-thousand-plus active catechists spread across the diocese. If that army is transformed through Life in the Spirit Seminars, just imagine what transformation would take place in the entire diocese. In Uganda and the Soroti Diocese, the catechists are closer to the people. They live with them, work with them, and are in daily contact with them. So, their encounter with the Lord will be a transforming experience to the Christian communities.

I’m thinking also of our parish council leaders because their encounter with the Lord will strengthen the faith of the people. I’m thinking of the youth leaders, the different choirs, the women leaders, the men, and so forth. If all these groups can be given an opportunity to have this experience, a lot will happen through this diocese. That is our prayer. I bless God very profoundly for you, dear brothers and sisters. Be assured of our prayers and love for you. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for loving the Church.