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- Vibrant Institutions
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- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
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- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

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- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

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As we forgive

After her daughter was kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Angelina Atyam realized that her mission was not just to secure the child's release, but to forgive her captors and work for peace and reconciliation.

by [Sherry Williamson](#)



When her daughter and more than 100 other school girls were abducted by Ugandan rebels, Angelina Atyam extended forgiveness even to those who had sinned against her.

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Seven years: the biblical time of restoration, freedom, and jubilee. Seven times 70: the number of times Jesus told Peter to forgive his brother. Seven years, seven months: the time that Angelina Atyam's daughter Charlotte was held captive after the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducted her and 138 other girls from a Catholic boarding school in 1996.

Sevens surface as a motif throughout the transformation of "Mama Angelina" from a soft-spoken nurse-midwife and mother of six to an international activist seeking the release of all Uganda's abducted children.

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Angelina Atyam and Bishop Paride Taban were

speakers at Teaching Communities Week at Duke Divinity school, sponsored by the Center for Reconciliation.

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Atyam's daughter was among an estimated 35,000 youth, some as young as 6, that the Ugandan government believes were abducted by the LRA during nearly 20 years of fighting. From 1987 until a ceasefire was signed in 2006, the LRA used children as human shields in battles with government troops. Boys were forced to become soldiers; girls were enslaved as "wives" to rebel leaders.

The path Atyam pursued to negotiate the children's release -- and to further peace and reconciliation within her country -- was inconceivable for many other parents, but she was resolute. Guided by the Lord's prayer, she and other parents of abducted children began to pray for forgiveness of the rebel soldiers.

"The lives and work of Angelina Atyam and [Sudanese] Bishop Taban are examples of what oases of hope look like in a broken world," says Emmanuel Katongole, co-director of the Center for Reconciliation and associate research professor of theology and world Christianity at Duke Divinity School.

"In listening to the stories they have come to share, the question for us is: 'How do you create and sustain lifegiving possibility in the midst of war, violence, poverty, and hatred?'"

The abduction

In October of 1996, Mama Angelina, as she was affectionately known, was working as a private nurse-midwife helping usher new life into the world. Her husband had a good job, and the couple's six children were all in school. The family home in Lira hummed with daily routines.

But the family was awakened at 6 a.m. by a neighbor pounding on their door. During the night, LRA rebels had stormed St. Mary's Catholic boarding school, where their 14-year-old daughter Charlotte was a student, and abducted the girls.

"I screamed and fell down," recalls Atyam, bringing a slender hand to her chest and apologizing for momentarily being at a loss for words. "I saw the fear in my husband's eyes. He was talking, but I couldn't hear a word he said. Our other children were afraid for their sister and their own lives."

When a friend arrived and began to pray with the family, Atyam remembers that a sense of strength and calm came over her. The feeling continued to sustain her as she and her husband rode with other parents to St. Mary's, 10 miles away in Aboke parish. They found the children's books, shoes and clothing scattered on the ground, Atyam said.

"Parents were wailing, 'The children are all gone.'" The dormitory windows were broken, smashed by the rebels to reach the girls huddled inside.

The parents learned that Sister Rachel, the petite but formidable nun who was the school's deputy headmistress, and a male teacher had followed the rebels into the jungle. When the pair caught up with them and pleaded for the girls' release, the rebel commander wrote "109" with the tip of his rifle's bayonet in the dust. That was the number of girls he would release.

When the headmistress continued to argue for the release of the entire group, he threatened to kill them all. She left with 109 girls, the words of those left behind echoing in her ears:

"Sister, please, I'm sick" ... "Sister, I'm the only child of my parents" ... "Sister, I have asthma" ... "Sister, they will rape us," followed by the girls' screams as the rebels kicked and beat them.

The next day, the headmistress arrived at the Atyams' home. With tears running down her cheeks, she told them that Charlotte had not been among the girls released.

"I think that Sister died inside that day," Atyam said. "Only half her soul was left, and she never recovered. Every time we later met, the tears would start to flow. I would try to get her to eat with me because I knew she couldn't eat and cry at the same time."

News later came that the rebels had marched most of the remaining school girls into neighboring southern Sudan, where Charlotte would be held captive and brutalized for the next seven years.

The Lord's prayer

Atyam and the parents of the other 29 girls started meeting weekly at a local church to fast and pray for their children's release. No amount of praying seemed to lift the parents' burdens. They had agreed not to conduct their own searches at the urging of the boarding school's deputy headmistress, who feared that might upset negotiations she had begun after getting little assistance from either the local police or the Ugandan government.

"I was confused, bitter, and very deep in my heart I was thinking, 'How do I avenge this?'" says Atyam. "Yet we continued to pray and call upon the LRA to release our children, protect them,

bring them home, and make peace again." That is, until a priest was leading the parents one day in the Lord's prayer. When they got to "Forgive us our sins," the parents suddenly stopped.

They could not say "as we forgive those who sin against us." Realizing that they were asking for forgiveness of their sins, yet could not forgive the rebels for stealing their children, they filed silently out of the church.

"We went back home to examine ourselves and our communities," says Atyam. "What was it that was burning -- the anger, the bitterness, the corrosion of our souls? We had put a curse on [the rebels], but we actually had put one on ourselves."

Atyam remembered the lesson of Matthew 5:23-24. Before you offer a sacrifice to God, put things right, or the sacrifice is useless. "We needed God, so we decided to put things right," says Atyam. "That prayer was a revival in our lives...praying for those who wronged us became our sacrifice."

When the parents met to pray the next week, a transformation had begun. As they prayed to forgive the rebels, their sorrows began to lift. They decided to share their gift of forgiveness, first with other people in their community -- and then in neighboring districts where other children had been kidnapped -- by organizing meetings to tell their story.

'Bullets have no eyes'

Many who heard the message were incredulous.

"Angelina, what planet are you from?" cried out a blind woman from a nearby district whose only son had been abducted. The rebels had forced the clinging 8-year-old from her arms with fire, and then slashed her with a machete and left her to die. "Don't you know what the rebels did to me?" she demanded. "Must I forgive?"

Atyam's answer was a resounding "yes." Unless the parents practiced forgiveness and sought a peaceful solution to the conflict, they would destroy what they most wanted back -- the children.

"Bullets have no eyes," she explained to the woman. "In the field, bullets would not know if a child was abducted or volunteered for the rebel army. War would destroy all these children."

She continued to spread the message of forgiveness. When she learned that the well-known rebel commander Rasca Lukwiya was holding Charlotte as his "wife," Atyam went a step further.

She traveled to the neighboring village where Lukwiya's mother lived, determined to convince the woman that she was ready to forgive him, his family, their clan and their tribe, which she held responsible for beginning the civil conflict.

During that visit, Atyam began by telling Lukwiya's mother, "I know you have nothing to do with the war and want your son back."

"She didn't find it very easy at first, but then we embraced and wept. We were reconciled," said Atyam, who felt as if a heavy burden was lifted from her heart and soul. "I could go back, pray, and call upon God for what I wanted from him."

Energized by their witness of forgiveness, the parents launched the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) to advocate for the release of all the abducted children in Uganda, the peaceful resolution of the armed conflict, forgiveness of the LRA and increased awareness of the plight of children in war

everywhere.

As co-founder and president, Atyam would become a midwife to a vision of a new future of reconciliation and peace for her country. She started by taking CPA's mission to radio and other media, and to rebel and government leaders, including the Ugandan president. Eventually, she traveled to Europe and the United States, where she petitioned the United Nations to intervene, and in 2002 addressed the United Nations Security Council.

While the publicity raised sympathy for the children's plight, it also drew the rebels' ire. In a matter of months, rebel leader Joseph Kony made Atyam an offer: In exchange for ceasing her advocacy, the LRA would release Charlotte. Atyam agreed to consider the offer if the LRA released all 30 girls from St. Mary's. The commander refused. And so did Atyam.

"It was as if God had knit the parents together to become one big family," said Atyam, who agonized about her decision. She hoped that Charlotte, whom she later learned had sometimes been beaten in response to CPA's advocacy, would forgive her. Atyam's own family was appalled, but for her there was no other choice.

"Somehow all those other children had become one in Charlotte. We could not pull the one away and leave the rest," Atyam said. That would have betrayed CPA, a group with hope and vision that they could not afford to lose for the sake of thousands of missing children, she said. "All those children had become my children."

The escape

As years passed, Atyam continued to lead CPA's efforts and to wrestle with God over her daughter's captivity.

"You are mighty, you are ever present, you can do anything," she cried out one night in 2004 as she sat on her bedroom floor. "It is written in the Bible that the seventh year is the year of freedom...the year of all good things. Lord, we know you don't change, but have you changed today -- because seven years have elapsed, and my daughter and the other children are still missing."

Three days later, Atyam received a telephone call that Charlotte, then 22, had escaped with her toddler and was safe at a Ugandan army camp. When they met, mother and daughter ran into each other's arms.

"We couldn't talk," Atyam said. "We just held each other and cried for a long, long time. She is the Lord's answer to my prayers."

Atyam eventually found Charlotte's 5-year-old son at one of the camps established for the one million Ugandans displaced during the civil conflict. The boy had fled the rebel camp during an air raid, convinced that his mother and baby brother had been killed.

'Give me the heart to forgive'

Today Charlotte is studying hospital management at the University of Health Sciences in Kampala. She says she prays for God's grace "to give me the heart to forgive. Every time I see these people walking freely on the streets, I feel like I need to kill somebody. And then I say, 'God will not forgive me unless I forgive them.'"

Charlotte says she is proud of her mother's work to free her and the other abducted girls. "I thought she made the right decision," she said of her mother's refusal to stop her advocacy work in exchange for only Charlotte's release.

And she wonders why God brought her back home safely when so many others died. "I just ask him to help me be a servant at his feet and serve my people. And it won't be about me any more. I know God needs me to do something, but I don't know what."

Now Charlotte is free to find out.

As for her mother, Atyam continues to advocate for abducted children with the [Concerned Children and Youth Association \(CCYA\)](#), an offshoot of CPA started by the siblings of abducted children. The

next step toward a peaceful future for Uganda, Atyam said, is to help children and youth transform a culture of war and violence to one of peace and reconciliation. The community based CCYA works to promote peace, unity, and social and economic empowerment with more than 500 children and youth abducted during the conflict.

“It is not easy to forgive,” Atyam says. “We have struggled to find peace in Uganda since 1996. We prefer to cling to bitterness, but bitterness is corrosive. Like a container filled with salt, it will destroy everything because the Lord cannot forgive us if we cannot forgive others. Life is wonderful if we let God heal us.”