

UGANDA ORTHODOX CHURCH
HOLY METROPOLIS OF KAMPALA & ALL UGANDA – CLERGY RETREAT

UNDER THE THEME

The Priest today from Liturgical Life to Shepherd activities

A presentation by Fr. Joseph Mutokya on 01st August, 2018

At St. Spyridon - Luguzi

TOPIC

The relationship between the Church and Schools

Introduction

Retreats like this one don't come too often in our local Church, certainly because of absence of funds as well as many other reasons you may suggest. This has increasingly made our engagement, to suggest common solutions to various questions, very limited. One question to which we have dragged on and on in identifying its solution is '*how the church and school intersect*'. And, as an educationalist, I consider it a privilege to think about it together with you today. The major theme designed by the organizers of this retreat makes me feel deeper warmth because I feel this is most likely to be a very historic event. I have a feeling that I will have wasted your time to remind you that, as Church, we are somehow stuck on how we transit from a ***missionary-reliant-church*** to a ***sufficiently self-reliant one***. I am however convinced that it is one of the reasons we are here for, so forgive me.

I am one of those people who this church has educated through the whole secondary and university education and, having graduated as teacher, I find it a good coincidence that I am tasked to discuss this topic with you. At the parish I serve, we have a school [*perhaps one of the best we have as church at its level*], and having served at other parishes [*like Katente, Degeya and Bugolo*] with schools, I honestly want to believe that I have a sufficient view of the realities of the challenges we face at this moment. Nevertheless, I know that some of the realities your parishes in the East, North and West may, in many ways, be different. Like Gerbrandt (2012), I acknowledge that the context for your schools is certainly different; the language and culture are different, the agenda and challenges faced by the church in different areas will certainly be different (Gerbrandt, Fall 2012).

One thing you will be aware of though, blessed fathers, is that **church has a special divine mission in this world of: '*Revealing and enhancing God's Kingdom in the world*'**. The church created our schools as a way of working at this mission. So as we share about the ***relationship between church and schools***, we are invited to have this mission statement in mind.

And, in this paper, I intend to use the situations I have gone through to suggest what I think is the best way church and her schools deserve to relate in order to be more productive than we currently are. I also borrow from an interesting writer, Gerald Gerbrandt, who in his journal article "What I (My School) Would Like the Church to Contribute to the Relationship Between Church and School" (Gerbrandt, Fall 2012), sounded to be unconsciously speaking to our church, in many aspects. I don't intend to speak for any of your schools. I only hope that, perhaps, some of my comments arising out of my own little experience may be used for better.

The "Church"

Like Gerbrandt, I find it making sense that we know what we exactly mean when we say church in our very particular Orthodox context, because many people use this term in many different ways.

Looking at the letters that make up the word **church**, it apparently has its root from the Greek word "Κυριακή" – 'kyriake' (*pronounced as **kiriaki***). The Greek word "Κυριακή" has a meaning equivalent to "**of the Lord**", which implies that **anything, anybody** or **people** dedicated to the Lord, our God, is **Church**. Theology defines it as **the body of Christ**, but this leans more towards **Ecclesia** which mainly refers to "**people**" (of course invited and '*have responded*' as we may be aware). Slightly extensive than Ecclesia, however, Church certainly includes non-people elements, and maybe this partly explains why the building we pray from is mainly called church; because it is dedicated to the service of the Lord, our God. You will notice too that the Lord's Day (Sunday) is called '*Kiriake*' in Greek.

The above foregoing expands the understanding of the term church from you and I, our local parish congregations, to also include the buildings, land, gardens, vehicles, books mention it. For today, however, I will lay emphasis on the **schools**. They are '**churches**' because they have a special divine mission they are to serve the Lord: "**revealing and enhancing God's kingdom to the world**" as I pointed out in my introduction. The governance of this church is desirably prioritized to be by the **Ecclesia**, even though many times this has miserably disappointed.

Historic Overview

When our ancestors Bsp. Spartas and Archmt. Obadia embarked on their journey to bring us light, one of the things they thought about was education. So, we are told, in ca. 1920, they established the first **private** education center in Anoonya Orthodox Primary school (Ssekamwa, 1997; UOC, 2014). They shortly after established a grammar school at Namungoona in 1934, which evolved into the present Chwa II memorial College. These two schools exist to-date, that is the good side of the story. The bad side, though, is that neither of the two actually reflects how long they have existed. Many other private schools, even some established just yesterday, have overwhelmingly succeeded to the extent unimaginable, much to the surprisingly miserable failure of ours. Needless to mention that to judge the literature about our church's educational challenges as lacking would be an understatement but, it seems that we went through some hard times in the 1950's all through the mid 1980's and certainly the political instability of the time had a good say in the stagnation. When there was recovery in the late 1980s, the then reigning Bishop Theodorus, with his team, fought hard to educate people who would fit our Ecclesiastical context. It seems, though, that we had already lost footing in the local education dynamics. This reason coupled with the issue of finance, certainly forced the blessed Bishop to educate most of the future church stewards from Greece, where they would get some academic sponsorship.

The arrival of Bsp. Jonah certainly found a politically stable Uganda. So his leadership sought to imagine how Education would be achieved locally. He embarked on completing education centers that had been stalled by the politically turbulent state in the country. The church, we can

summarily say, really constructed schools in this era. Very many, and actually some like Bishop Nankyama and Chwa II boomed to some admirably promising heights in the early 2000s. Not only schools. Many church structures have been consecrated as well, and I think so far God has granted him mercy to ordain more stewards to pastor this Church than his predecessors (UOC, 2014). Glory to God!

It is very important to note here, though, that despite the booming of the schools during the aforementioned period, over 95% of the learners therein were church sponsored which made them stand on very soft foundation. They had fully been constructed on foreign aid, teachers paid by foreign aid and all detail. School managers understood themselves as explicit from the planning system. Actually the blessed fathers were seen as everything, even in areas where they lacked expertise, because they are the ones who knew where the monies came from. Some head-teachers constructed their schools from ours, because we were only a source of capital.

Current state

From the education secretariat of the church, we are informed that we are currently blessed with over 100 education institutions, annually handling a minimum of over 30,000 souls of learners. We employ over 2500 personnel as teachers and helping staff in these education centers, according to the recent Education Secretariat Report 2017 (Gulere, 2017). No doubt these numbers give us a sufficient platform for us to proclaim the Good News.

Unfortunately, the financial crisis that hit philanthropic brethren in Greece landed us into a new era. It really hit us hard, and forced the metropolis to rethink her approach. The implication was that:

- a) Numbers in schools drastically reduced because church could no longer sustain their sponsorship.
- b) Sustainability of efficient staff became a problem.
- c) Even the ones we had educated could not serve these schools because they would not be able to earn a living.
- d) Even just day-to-day activities like feeding became a real problem.
- e) Parents who were financially able took their learners to other better schools because ours drastically declined.
- f) Administration wrangles became a common feature, most notable between school administration and the parish priests who, perhaps understandably, refocused on them as means of survival.
- g) There was breakage of communication between the Ecclesia and Schools because, somehow, the Ecclesia sounds irrelevant in the school's struggle for survival.
- h) And gradually it is increasingly looking like there is a straight line between Church and schools with a very bleak relationship. When you find one who wishes to coat it, he at least makes sure it is very faint. But let us borrow the words of Gerbrandt (2012) when he said:

"To speak of the church is to speak of a body serving the mission of God. It is to speak

*of a community of God, with the mandate or mission to reach out beyond itself in witness and service to the world. God did not create the church as a lifeboat to save us from the world, but as God's means of reaching the world, of being salt and light and blessing in a hurting world. A school thus can only claim to be a **church school** if it shares and contributes to this mission. And given the mission of the church, it must always have its vision focused on the world and the church's outreach mission to the world" (Gerbrandt, Fall 2012).*

Is there a way out?

Amidst the challenges which the Uganda Orthodox Church currently battles against, we are often prompted to imagine how these schools can thrive in this increasingly secularized society, ***yet without compromising the purpose for which they were established***. I believe our schools should relate to the Ecclesia at the ***different levels of governance*** in a more positive way than it is today. I completely agree with Gerbrandt's conviction that "*... the more [governance] levels of the church a school has contact with or works with, the more it will be able to contribute to the church's mission*" (Gerbrandt, Fall 2012). This understanding then directs us to:

a) View Schools as an arm of the Church

It is important that we look at Church as having as many parts, each contributing on the basis of its task and special grace. Today we have focused on schools but there are others like health centers, Mothers Union, Youths ministry and so on. We shall need to acknowledge that these schools form an integral part of the church, within the church rather than an entity external to the church. It is therefore not proper at all when we seek to talk of schools and the church as two separate entities.

And I believe, you will bear me witness, this is what the church leadership has always preached. Nevertheless, this in many ways has always ended up causing insolvable conflict at the parishes. Why?

I personally believe it is because of the absence of a well-defined **formal structure**. Note, here, that I present '*my belief*' so don't lose sleep over my argument. I however want to emphatically support it in this paper. Without a formal connection, the relationship is undermined. We are in a system which, in my view, is extremely fertile for silly conflicts. The priest is at the parish seen as a threat to the wellbeing of the schools, a notion which actually you will agree we have many times not done better to **practically denounce**. The priest, lacking sufficient technical advice, easily finds himself in a state where he **alone** has to make very crucial decisions and this leaves him too weak and vulnerable to manipulation. Sometimes, by God's mercy, he does it right. But because he is alone, other opportunists are easily able to maneuver and go round to fail him. In the end, blessed fathers, we end up having a negative attitude to the managers of our schools.

b) View schools as an agency assisting the church in her mission

I am not to educate anyone that schools give us an opportunity to meet hundreds of the society

members on a regular basis. Of course some are ours, already baptized. But a large majority are not yet. I have seen Muslims use such platforms to do their Islamic education and, sadly, some in our very schools. Have you met a school with an Imam paid to teach their Muslim learners, when it is difficult to find source of funds to pay a Catechist to deliver Orthodox Catechism in our very school? Of course there are reasons, one of it being that majority parents in such schools are Muslims, and many times Orthodox are too few to support the school, but when will we be that many? There are schools where administration find it a problem just to direct learners to go for church congregational service. I think this is very wrong and it is important we agree to sort it. Schools need to invent effective ways of nurturing good relationships between our students and local congregations, because “when students develop the habit of not participating in the life of a congregation, it is hard to change this after leaving school”, rightly argues Gerbrandt (2012). A good relationship between church and the schools lays good ground to prepare future church leaders. Future leaders need settings or congregations where they can test their calling and improve their skills, places where mistakes can be made without rejection.

c) View schools as a thinking partner

For some good time, school managers have claimed to always have been thought for. I think this is not proper. It is important we try to think together as partners. We are charged with the social responsibility of guaranteeing our relevance to the general community that harbors us. It would make a lot of sense if we thought together about how better we can deliver this because many of our schools are dealing with a population we don't get chance to interact with as priests. It would even enable us to increase our exactness in the way we strategize for the Gospel message. Where we are, it looks like the priest [practically] has no place in the schools because administration is very uncomfortable involving him in their planning, and the reverse tends to be true, because the priest is seen as a despotic leader who when he says, nobody should say otherwise.

That is why I say that one of the things I would wish from the church is a partnership in this careful thinking process, a partnership in considering the key issues facing the larger church, and what faithful responses might be.

d) View schools as immediate supporter

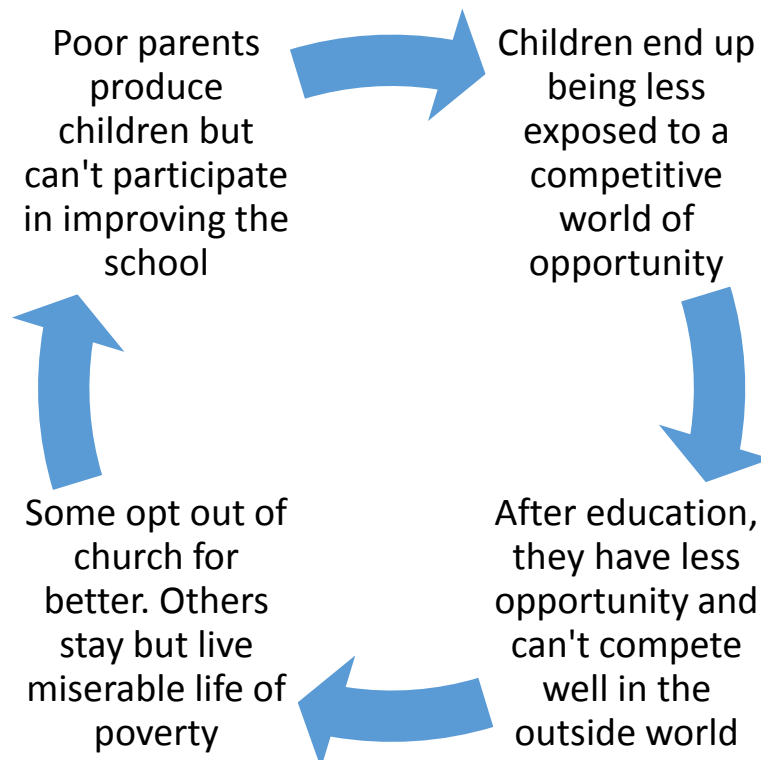
As already pointed out above, the Church has for a very long time supported these schools right from construction, to sustaining them over the years. The church used her methods to exhort against immorality, encourage and counsel those under difficulties or fail to conform to desired standards. The Ecclesia continues this role but these schools are invited to assist her to enhance her ministry. Especially at this very critical point where we are as Church, these schools, I won't shy away, need to **guarantee financial support**— for say *formally* catering for the ministers' allowances, supporting Sunday school, taking care of the day-to-day expenses, transporting ministers, church repairs and maintenance etc. This is because our congregations certainly still lack financial muscle to be self-supportive.

Conclusion

Aware of the very poor state in which schools are, compared with the declining energy of the local Ecclesia in fulfilling her responsibilities, there seems to be correlation between Church and schools' growth. Many of you will attest that these schools have only enjoyed promising times whenever the Church has been on a progressively stable trend. Whenever the church has faced challenges, schools have always been the leading casualties.

This supports what I have always argued that '*schools will never be better when the Ecclesial-church is languishing towards mediocrity*'. It is the Ecclesia that, presumably, should produce the managers of these schools. But on the other hand, the more our schools are unable to give the best education to our youngsters, the more challenges we shall face, as the Ecclesia. Why? An '*Ecclesial-Educational vicious cycle of poverty (both spiritual and material)*' already witnessed will gradually be cemented. How?

The church will produce children who will require formal education. But because parents are poor and can't have a say in the affairs of the schools, the poor ones end up helplessly studying in schools with less exposure to the outside world which would have provided future opportunities in this increasingly **technical-know-who** managed society. After school, they are exposed to a tough world with less or no job opportunities. Some come back to serve our very poor schools, from where survival is very hard because we cannot pay them sufficiently, for even just issuing a simple appointment letter remains an unacceptable idea in our schools; but others go out to look for opportunities elsewhere and we end up losing them. Alternatively, parents who are fairly well-off choose to take their children to better schools, but many times they are indoctrinated from there and the life-long friends they end-up making are those that actually take them away from us. And cycle will continue as below.



However, the Holy metropolis recently blessed the Education Secretariat. This was tasked with the responsibility to revive the declining schools and give technical advice on how the Church and schools can live mutually. Stake-holders, including all priests have been invited to give their strategizing input for better. I want to hope that soon their technical advice will be integrated by the Holy Metropolis to draw up a comprehensive Education policy that will go as far as defining the structure of management of schools at parish level and the channels through which the different players interact without compromising our common mission to which we are called. I know this body will have its own challenges, but my call is that we give them a chance. Where we feel unconvinced, let us feel free to enthusiastically **interject and make our feelings clearly known**. We are the stewards of this Church today, and whatever we do, or say, matters. But what we choose not to say may easily end up being "*the might-have-been solution*" had you said it. We should, in my view, **stop the practice of keeping quiet when we are meant to debate**. And as brethren in Christ, it is important we learn to embrace diverging views from ours, even the dissenting voices. Let us engage, in Christ!

Finally, I want to thank the organizers of this retreat in a very special way, particularly the blessed fr. Goerge, Fr. Ephraim and TEAM. My prayer is that you not only achieve the goals of the retreat, but also earn a lot of blessing from it. Pray for us, as local church, to one time achieve a better life in which the world we are serving actually is able to see the image of Christ. I must thank the Holy metropolis for the blessing. You very well know who a Bishop is in the Church. He is the key!

But I won't forget you, the participants. If you had chosen not to come, or not to listen, I would certainly be useless. It is very possible that one or two among us may have got offended by, or a part of, my presentation. I am honestly sorry that I hurt you. But God really knows I did not intend to harm anyone. May God bless your effort!

References

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