

The Grays' home in Bundimulinga Village



Wendy and Rick Gray with sons Samuel (left) and Aidan (right). Not pictured: Chase Fletcher (born February 3, 2007)

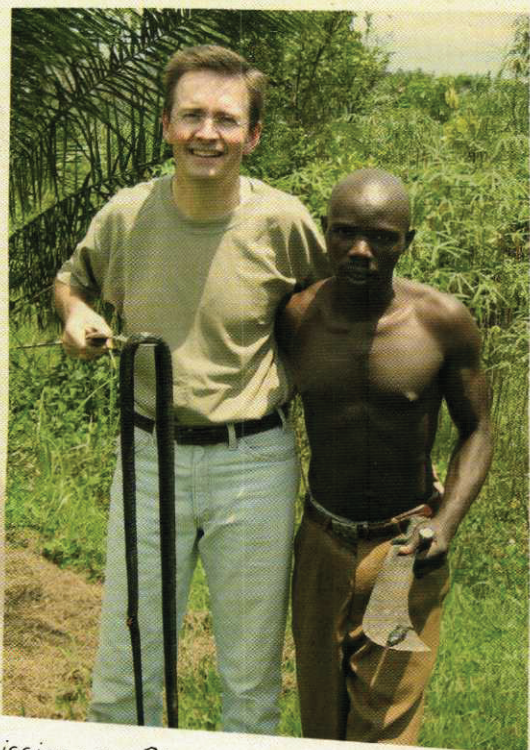
BATTLING FOR CHRIST'S KINGDOM IN

Africa

My wife, Wendy, and I serve the Lord in Africa. As singles, we both felt drawn to live and minister the Gospel of God's grace among the Babwisi tribe along the remote border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wendy focused on Bible translation, and I worked to plant churches and train pastors. We figured that our ministries were a pretty good match—and so were we! We married and continued our labors in a place of great spiritual darkness, among people notorious for witchcraft. The Enemy seems to have a stronghold on our valley. Over the years it became all too apparent that he would not relinquish his reign without a fight. One Lord's Day, in the summer of 2006, we received a vivid reminder of our foe's fury.

Because our then-one-year-old son, Aidan, was restless, Wendy gathered him in her arms and left the worship service early. We live next door to the church, so I did not think much about seeing the two of them return just after the benediction. But the message Wendy shared sure gave me pause. "There's a snake in our attic!" she announced anxiously.

About a month earlier, our family had rejoined the fight to advance Christ's Kingdom in Uganda. Upon our arrival, rats, bats, and lizards were the only other witnessed occupants in our little tin-roof house, so I doubted whether a snake could be among our uninvited guests. "It's probably just an overgrown gecko," I reasoned. Nevertheless, I sought out Samweli, a Ugandan friend, and asked if he would join me on a "search-and-destroy" mission.



Missionary Rick Gray (left) and friend Samweli found this snake in Rick's attic. It provided a great reminder about the spiritual battle they fight.

Upon reaching the house, Wendy directed us to the room where Aidan sleeps. Then she pointed to the ceiling. "It's up there," she insisted. So off I went to collect the ladder. Soon Samweli and I ascended into the dark attic, armed with a small flashlight and a sharp sickle. We moved several boxes and boards around until finally Samweli spied the slithery creature.

"It's a snake, and it's a big one!" he exclaimed. "What should we do now?" I wondered aloud. "Do you have any kerosene?" Samweli asked. "Yes, we keep some to run our refrigerator," I answered. Still I queried, "What will we do with kerosene?"

Samweli explained: "We'll pour it on the snake, and it will die. My father has killed several snakes that way." Bowing to the assured and more experienced reptile exterminator, I hurried off to get a small container of kerosene. Upon my return I handed the pungent liquid over to my fellow hunter. "What about these?" I asked, holding out the flashlight and sickle. "You hold them," he instructed.

Then, before I knew it, Samweli poured the kerosene over the slumbering snake. The enraged creature rose up and headed straight for the first threat it could identify—the clueless missionary holding the flashlight! In self-defense I swung the sickle hard at the attacking snake. One blow, two, three...! All the while Samweli cried, "Get it! Get it! Get it!"

Soon the sickle cut a hole through the thin plywood ceiling, and I yelled for Wendy to make sure the children were not below. After several more swipes at the wounded aggressor,

New Life Presbyterian Church in Bundimulinga Village, the church where Rick serves, sits next door to his family's home.



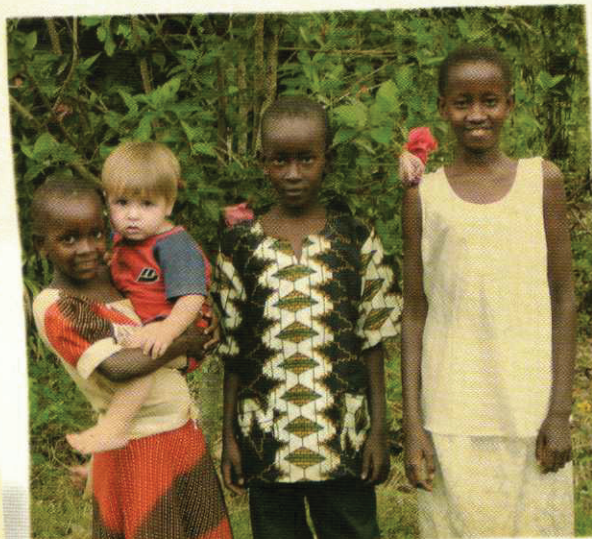
it fell through the jagged opening and plopped onto the room's cement floor. Close behind, we snake stalkers hurried down the ladder. On the way I picked up a machete in case the scaly intruder needed to be finished off. Then, seeing the long black snake still wriggling weakly, I chopped off its head. We all heaved a big sigh of relief.

Before burying the lifeless reptile and cleaning up the collateral damage, I measured it. It stretched more than six feet. As best we can tell from a book about snakes in East Africa, our vanquished foe was a poisonous black-necked spitting cobra.

And so, upon our return to Africa, the Lord gave us a timely and sobering reminder about the battle for Christ's Kingdom. Of course the Church's adversary is exceedingly more sinister, and the stakes are eternally higher than a little scuffle in the attic. ►

But the Kingdom only advances through combat—albeit with quite unconventional weapons. The battlefield is both within and without. Most of the time we have no idea where the enemy of our souls lies or what he is up to.

Yet the Prince of Darkness is never far away, and he is always ready and willing to strike. Still, our Light and Defender keeps constant watch over us. Nothing escapes His notice. Just as He crushed the serpent's head by ascending Calvary's tree so long ago, our King continues to lead us victoriously—often in spite of ourselves—as He reclaims territory rightfully belonging to His glorious Kingdom of grace, truth, and love. †



above: Rick and Wendy's sons are very at home in Africa. Here is Aidan (not long after the snake incident) with a few of the boys' closest friends in Bundibugyo.



above: These men were some of Rick's students at the Semuliki Institute for Theological Education (SITE), the school he founded in 2000 to train pastors in Bundibugyo. It is currently dormant, though he is trying to reorganize the school under indigenous leadership. "Semuliki" is the name of the valley in which the Grays live. He chose this name for the Bible school because it includes both the Uganda and Democratic Republic of the Congo sides of the border. The school did have two students from Democratic Republic of the Congo, both of whom were in their late fifties.



above: This scanned old photo shows an aerial view of Bundibugyo District in the Semuliki Valley. The line in the center of the photo is the grass airstrip that chartered Mission Aviation Fellowship planes use for takeoffs and landings.

RICK GRAY

Rev. Rick Gray (MDiv '87) is regional director for Eastern Africa under Mission to the World. Rick serves missionaries and indigenous church leaders to impact their communities with the Good News of Christ Jesus. His initial interest in Africa was stirred at Covenant Seminary through his African classmates. Rick and Wendy live in Bundibugyo in western Uganda, in the foothills of the Ruwenzori Mountains. Rick began living and laboring among the Babwisi tribe in 1989. The Grays continue to fight for Christ's Kingdom with their sons, Grant (age 4), Aidan (age 2), and Chase (3 months).

Dear Prayer Warrior,
 "The Lord called me...." "The Spirit led us...." "God directed him..."
 I have used words similar to these myself, and I have no doubt that they usually issue from a sincere heart. But as the years roll by, I confess to have grown increasingly skeptical of statements claiming enlightened detection of Divine will. Maybe it is because I have been around long enough to see the questionable outcomes yielded by the initial bold declarations. Maybe it is because I have grown weary of seeing the eternal God blamed for man's misinterpretation of temporal circumstances. Maybe it is because I am jealous that others seem to hear the Almighty's voice in ways that I do not. Probably it is a combination of all these reasons and others. But the longer I live, the less confident I am of discerning the Lord's higher purposes in specific human events.

Prayer Letter

As the Grays continue to serve the Lord in Africa, the Lord remains faithful to grow them into the likeness of Jesus. This excerpt from their January 2007 prayer letter reveals a bit about how God has been sanctifying their hearts and minds recently.

Please understand, I am not denying that God speaks to us through His written Word. Nor am I doubting that the Spirit convicts us of sin or prompts us to action. I heartily believe and revel in the reality of a Father who communicates and communes with His children in these ways and more every day. But what I struggle with is a finite and fallen mind fathoming the infinite and holy intentions behind life's complexities. How can I be certain whether a specific setback is the Lord's way of redirecting my steps or the Enemy's attack because I am on the right path? I suppose some have a gift for discernment. But I also suspect others mistake self-will for God's will. Still, I find myself becoming increasingly hesitant to deduce direction from above through happenings below. It is not because I doubt a connection between the two. Rather, I do not trust my capacity to comprehend the connection.

And although part of me longs to better understand the inner workings of providence in the affairs of man, another part of me perceives that this realm does not belong to me. Mine is to walk by faith, not by sight or sense. The mystery and wonder of God's activity in, under, and through the daily occurrences of our lives is not so much to be figured out as it is to be embraced by faith. It should not be so much a cause for consternation as a call to celebration. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!" writes the apostle Paul in worship to a sovereign Lord [Rom. 11:33]. Of course Paul was reflecting upon eternal destinies. But I think the same doxology can just as appropriately be sung over the Master's movement through more mundane matters as well.

"What does all this have to do with missions in Eastern Africa?" you may ask. Time and time again, I thought God was doing one thing in Uganda, only later to discover He was doing something completely different. In some cases it seemed that the Spirit was at work within a person's heart, but later it became clear that actions were motivated by the flesh. Other times I surmised questionable intentions that eventually proved quite laudable. So while I can confidently affirm that the Lord is building His Kingdom in Eastern Africa, I cannot be so sure of all the particular ways He is doing so. When I consider how the disciples at first misunderstood Jesus' death upon the cross, none of this should be surprising. They initially misjudged Calvary as their rabbi's greatest defeat, only to discover three days later that it was His greatest victory. They surmised their Messiah was saving them from Roman rule, but eventually He proved to be delivering them from an unimaginably fiercer foe....