

## **Olang', Habakkuk Festo, the first black archbishop of Kenya**

Festo Habakkuk Olang' was the first African archbishop of Kenya and bishop of Nairobi in the Anglican church of Kenya.

Festo Olang' was born about 1914, around the beginning of the first World War, at Ebusakami Esabalu village, Maseno, near the equator in south Bunyore of Kakamega district. His father, Etarwa, had four wives. His mother, Emisiko Sambaya, was Etarwa's senior wife and the only one to have two surviving sons.

Though born in Kakamega district, Olang' spent most of his childhood and the better part of his youth in Kano, Kisumu district, and thus learned to speak Luo and Luhya fluently. While Olang' was still young, his parents moved to Kano where there was ample grazing land for his father's many cattle. His parents settled at Nyamasaria in Kano and never moved back to Maseno, Bunyore. Life at Nyamasaria continued in much the same way as at Maseno. Each day Olang' and the other boys took the animals out to graze.

In 1925 he began attending Kisumu Primary School, then called Komulo School. In 1927, he sat for the Common Entrance Examination at Maseno School and was admitted in 1928. He studied there for three years but found it quite a traumatic experience to be away from home, having to conform to the school regulations and dress code. However, he was greatly helped and influenced by the headmaster of Maseno School and famous mathematician, Mr. Edward Carey Francis. Olang's faith in Jesus Christ grew and was strengthened under his guidance and, like many of the 300 boys at the school, Olang' taught at Sunday schools in the area each Sunday, after learning how to give the lesson under Mr. Francis's tutelage each week. Olang' taught Luyia speaking groups and was also encouraged to plant trees around the village churches.

While at Maseno, Olang' was prepared for confirmation by Archdeacon Owen and confirmed by Bishop Heywood. This was a marvelous experience for him. He started learning English while in standard four and by the third year in Maseno, standard six, he was using English as the medium of instruction and for writing his examinations.

During this time he was still the only Christian in the family and his father was suspicious of the influence being exerted on him. Among Olang's colleagues was Mr. Apollo Ohanga, one-time minister in the colonial government. After Maseno School, Olang' began studies at Alliance High School in Kikuyu in 1931 through the influence of Carey Francis, who later became the headmaster at Alliance. Here he met former minister Mr. James Gichuru. Olang' was at Alliance from 1931 to 1935, the first three years for secondary level education and the last two for teacher training-for teaching was the career he thought he should follow. During his time at Alliance, he acquired leadership abilities and developed a great love for sports and for communicating with people about Christ.

After his teacher training, Olang' went back to teach at Maseno School for four years. In January 1940 he moved to Butere after the principal of the newly-founded Butere Girls' School, Miss Lee Appleby, invited him to teach there.

While teaching at Maseno, Olang' decided it was time to think about marriage. As was the Luyia custom in those days, he asked his relatives in Ebusakami to look around for a suitable wife. They found Eseri Twera, the daughter of Joshua Olume, who had been brought up a Christian and had learned to read and write at the Church of God Mission in Kima. This was all the education offered to girls in those days. After consulting with the family, he was allowed to meet Eseri to get acquainted and to decide whether

their relatives' choice was a good one before the engagement was confirmed. Indeed it was, and on December 24, 1937, they were married at St. Paul's Church, Maseno. The Lord blessed Olang' and Eseri with twelve children.

In 1943, while teaching at Butere, Olang' received a letter from the Rev. Martyn Capon, principal of St. Paul's Divinity School, Limuru (now St. Paul's United Theological College), requesting him to consider training for the ministry. After praying and talking it over with his wife, Eseri, he quit teaching to study for the ministry by enrolling at St. Paul's Divinity School in January 1944. At that time, there were only thirty-six African clergy and eighteen European clergy in the whole country. Among the tutors at Limuru was Rev. Obadiah Kariuki, later consecrated with Olang' as one of the first African bishops.

On December 9, 1945, Olang' was ordained a deacon by Bishop Crabbe at St. Stephen's Church, Nairobi. After ordination, he was attached to the Ramula pastorate under the rural dean of the area, Rev. Alf Stanway. This rural deanery covered all of Seme, Karateng', and half of Gem. He served in the pastorate in 1946 and 1947, running the parish, doing evangelism, and building up the Christians there. As a deacon, Olang had the tremendous joy and privilege of becoming a godparent to his own mother, giving her baptismal instructions that led to her baptism in 1946. His father, who had died earlier, had also been baptized through Olang's influence. After his consecration, he was also able to confirm his mother.

In 1948, Olang went back to Limuru to complete his theological training for ordination into the priesthood. At the end of the second term in 1948 he got a scholarship from the British Council that enabled him to travel and study at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, in England, for one academic year. The main course of study was on the Holy Spirit and church administration. While in England, he was attached to the parish of Holy Trinity, Bristol, where the vicar was Rev. Fred Buff, his former teacher at Alliance High School.

In 1950, he returned to Kenya and was ordained into the priesthood at St. Paul's, Maseno, by Bishop Crabbe. Olang' also became the principal of Maseno Bible School which had been started only a short time before. In 1952, he became the first African rural dean for Central Nyanza and vicar of Bunyore parish through the end of 1954.

On May 15, 1955, Olang' and Obadiah Kariuki were consecrated at Namirembe Cathedral, Kampala in Uganda by Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, as the first African assistant bishops in Kenya. Olang' presided over all of western Kenya while Rev. Kariuki took central Kenya. Olang's duties included confirmations, visitations, counseling, and preaching, just to name a few.

In December 1960, he was appointed bishop of Maseno, which covered Nyanza province and Western province. He was enthroned in 1961 by Archbishop Beecher at St. Stephen's church, Kisumu, which later became his pro-cathedral. Tremendous church growth led to the subdivision of the diocese of Maseno into Maseno North and Maseno South. Olang' remained in charge of Maseno North while Bishop Evan Agola presided over Maseno South. Roughly, Maseno North served the Luyia population and Maseno South, the Luo.

During his time both as bishop of Maseno and of Maseno North, Olang' served as chairman of both the Luo and the Oluluyia Bible Translation Committees. He spoke both languages fluently and due to his efforts the Bible, the Prayer Book and Hymn books were translated into Luyia and Luo. In Festo Olang's autobiography, Deaconess Appleby, a member of the committee, commends Olang's work in translation saying: "His particular contribution to the work of the committee was his keen perception of all aspects of the meaning of a word; he was usually the one who spotted possible ambiguities in what seemed to the rest of us good renderings." (Olang', p. 47)

In 1970, soon after the diocese had been divided, Archbishop Beecher decided to retire a few months before reaching the age of sixty-five. Due to the rapid growth of the Anglican Church, the province of East Africa was divided into the provinces of Kenya and of Tanzania. Olang' was elected the first African archbishop of Kenya and bishop of Nairobi and was enthroned on August 3, 1970, in All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, by the Most Rev. L. J. Beecher.

In 1978, Olang' was awarded an honorary doctor's degree by Sewanee, the University of the South, U.S.A. As archbishop of Kenya, Olang' pioneered several changes in the church. First, the church's provincial constitution was drawn up for Kenya alone. Secondly, as archbishop, he participated in all the ceremonial and administrative functions in the government, which included being present at the opening of parliament and leading prayers on state occasions. He also served as the bishop-in-ordinary to the armed forces.

Archbishop Olang' held an ecclesiastical court for discipline of the clergy. He also strengthened connections with the worldwide Anglican Church everywhere by personal visits as well as administrative measures. On behalf of the Anglican Church, by then known as Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK), he had the opportunity to visit many countries including Great Britain, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, the U.S.A., Australia, and many more. Several times he took part in Billy Graham's Evangelical Crusades. He hosted the Anglican Consultative Council, representing the worldwide Anglican Church at Limuru in 1971. In 1974 he organized the Pan-African Christian Assembly in Nairobi. In 1975 he hosted the conference of Anglican archbishops from all over the world at Trinity College, Nairobi. In 1975 he helped host the Partners in Mission Consultation, also in Nairobi. These gatherings were very important to the growth of the church as Olang' notes:

But these gatherings provided more than just spectacles for church members to admire the vestments and ceremonials of different Episcopal churches. They gave us the chance really to consult one another, draw on one another's wisdom and, more than that, marvel at the worldwide fellowship of which the church is part. It is a joy to me to have participated in all these events and facilitated some of them. (Olang', p. 56)

In 1977, Olang' hosted all the African archbishops in Nairobi and formed the "African Lambeth," inaugurated as the Conference of Anglican Provinces in Africa (CAPA) of which he was made chairman. He participated in interdenominational fellowships including the World Council of Churches (WCC), the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the National Council of Churches of Kenya, and generally encouraged ecumenism. He was also strongly and deeply involved in the East Africa Revival movement and the unity within it despite occasional differences of opinion. Through the revival movement, he learned that only "repentance was the way to Christ." (Olang' p. 35)

Olang' was archbishop from 1971 to 1980, the year he retired. He was respected for his humility and did not engage in fighting for positions in the church. He preached peace, love, unity, and humility and hence was a great force in keeping the Anglican Church united during his tenure. Olang' spearheaded many development projects in the Anglican Church such as schools and hospitals. Under his leadership, many parishes and churches were created and grew up rapidly. By the time he retired the church had grown to 288 parishes, spread over seven dioceses and served by 374 ordained clergy. He encouraged transparency and accountability among both the clergy and Christians in general. He worked closely with government authorities as an advisor. Archbishop Olang' will be greatly remembered for his humility, uprightness, and respect for

human dignity. He was a man of extraordinary ability.

His wife Eseri died in 1997 at age seventy-eight. His son William died in 1986 and his son David died in 2001. Finally, at the age of ninety-five, Olang', first archbishop of the Anglican Church in Kenya, died on Tuesday, February 3, 2004. He left behind eight daughters and two sons, forty-five grandchildren, and twenty-four great-grandchildren.

Alfred Sheunda Keyas

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