
PROFILE

George Agoki

Dialogue with an Engineering Lecturer from Kenya



George Agoki is a senior lecturer in engineering at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, where he has been teaching since 1976. His areas of specialization are civil engineering,

town planning, and surveying; his major research interest involves transportation safety and traffic accident prevention.

Born in 1950 to a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and teacher, Agoki is one of nine children. He spent his childhood and youth on denominational school campuses in Uganda and Kenya; then proceeded to earn a Bachelor of Science in Engineering, a Master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning, and a Ph.D. in civil engineering from the University of Nairobi.

His wife, Elizabeth, is a nurse and midwife, specializing in intensive care. Currently, she is involved in research at the University of Nairobi, focusing

on sexually transmitted diseases. The Agokis have two daughters and two sons.

Dr. Agoki served for several years as associate director of communication for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kenya, concentrating on radio and television. He is currently a church elder and the faculty sponsor for the association of Adventist students at the University of Nairobi.

Dynamic, articulate, and outgoing, George Agoki belongs to a growing group of Kenyan Adventist professionals who are making a significant contribution to the development of their homeland and to the progress of their church.

Why did you choose engineering as a career?

I've been always interested in how things work, in how we are able to create, design, and manipulate things such as motors, machines, roads, and buildings. This interest was fostered by my Adventist teachers. As a youngster, I was fascinated by the way they used machinery and equipment on the farm and in the laboratory and workshop. They, in turn, encouraged us to take apart and to reassemble all kinds of motors and electrical equipment. In fact, most of what I've accomplished in my professional field I owe to Adventist education.

Are there other prominent Adventists in Kenya who have also been educated in our schools?

Certainly. Although our church does not offer the full high school program required for university admission, Adventist elementary and lower secondary schools have provided solid training. With that background, many of us have pursued advanced studies and now are involved in diverse profes-

sions. Let me mention just a few. Lazarus Amayo is the assistant minister for education in Kenya. Mary Angawa serves as senior magistrate in Nairobi. Elkana Bosire is a justice of the high court in Mombasa. Winston Osongo teaches engineering at the University of Nairobi. Maragia Omwega currently works with the Kenya Medical Research Institute. The director of the Kenyatta National Hospital is Dr. Naphtali Agata. All are products of Adventist education and all are involved in our church as lay leaders.

How is the Adventist Church perceived by the people of Kenya?

There is a general awareness that our church is growing. Our current membership stands at 300,000 in a country of 25 million—that is, one Adventist for every 85 inhabitants. Several of our activities and services are well-known. Many people are acquainted with our Five-day Plan to Stop Smoking, our Dorcas Society, the newly established University of Eastern Africa, and the Loma Linda University Heart Team. In-

creasingly, Seventh-day Adventists in Kenya are being seen as a special group of people who enhance the enjoyment and meaning of life.

From your perspective, what are the major challenges that Adventists face in Kenya?

They are similar to those faced by Kenyans at large—education, health, and economic development. As a parent, I'm particularly concerned about the lack of adequate facilities to properly educate our youth in view of the negative influences that have an impact on them—broken homes, materialism, drugs. Our church is making a difference through our schools. In the area of health, our Kendu Hospital and several dispensaries provide help. But these institutions are few, not well-distributed in our territory and, due to limited resources, are not being expanded and upgraded. I would like to see our educational and health-related institutions serving a larger sector of our population, contributing to the development of our society through young men and women skilled for self-employment and

employment and conscious about their health.

How are you involved in the life of your congregation?

As a church elder, I assist the pastor in preaching, outreach, counseling, and helping solve some of the routine challenges faced by an Adventist congregation. I also serve as director of the Pathfinder Club.

Please, tell us about your professional life.

One of my sisters lost her right leg as a result of a car accident. This led me to study the causes of road accidents and the interaction of various factors involved in them. When an accident takes place, who is to blame—the engineer that designed the road, the maintenance crew, the vehicle, the driver, or what? For years I have been refining a theoretical framework that can be used to design safer road systems.

Do you find any connection between your Christian faith and your research?

Yes, at a basic conceptual level. As we investigate the behavior of individuals involved in road accidents, we seek to understand the psychological and psychopathological factors affecting system design and safety. In such a study I see many evidences of a wise God who created us with talents and with the power of choice. He is the designer and originator of the laws and interrelationships that I study. I'm also aware of our fallenness and our limitations. This dual perspective colors all my work and research. I realize that beyond the human and material factors relating to road design and safety there are overriding eternal issues at work. My belief in God and my understanding of the great controversy between good and evil provides me with a comprehensive framework in which I can carry out my studies.

Can you share your Christian convictions at work?

Yes. Engineering is a precise applied science. We make measurements and look for ac-

curacy. This relates to exactness and truth. But human beings cannot achieve exact accuracy and instead must rely on theories of probability. As I discuss these issues with my students and colleagues in any of the basic or applied sciences, we come naturally to matters of absolute truth, which can be grasped only from the perspective of a perfect God.

How do you see your role as sponsor of Adventist students attending the University of Nairobi.

Of the 7,000 students enrolled in the various colleges of our university, approximately 200 are Seventh-day Adventists. They represent about one-fourth of the number of Adventists who pursue advanced studies in public universities in Kenya. Our church has appointed a chaplain and an assistant to coordinate the church's ministry on their behalf in our country. In addition, there are hundreds of other Adventist students from Kenya who attend universities abroad, in India, Europe, and North America.

At the University of Nairobi, part of our challenge is to locate and attract to our fellowship all the new students who have an Adventist background. Many go through a crisis as they move away from their homes or from our boarding academies and find themselves with a lot of unstructured time in their hands. We know that it is to their advantage to remain in contact with their Adventist peers. Through the student association we seek to provide them encouragement, counseling, and spiritual support.

What counsel would you give to Adventists planning to attend public universities?

It would be ideal if all could take some type of preuniversity course, to review in depth the fundamental beliefs of our church. It is so important that they know what they believe and why, instead of accepting our doctrines blindly. They must see that these convictions are relevant to the academic setting they are about to enter.

Once they understand the rationale behind our beliefs and realize the benefits of applying them to daily living, they are ready to relate intelligently to life in a secular university community. Then, as they begin their studies, they should make a personal pledge to maintain a daily relationship with God, to nurture a living faith. These two key steps will help them to remain faithful and to grow in their Christian experience as they relate to new modes of thinking.

Do you have any other advice?

The pressures of the secular environment and the desire to experiment with new life-styles are forces that have an impact on Adventist university students. Since they are pretty much on their own, they must learn to make principled decisions affecting their time, their bodies, and their resources. They need to be aware of the disastrous results of certain types of behavior. They also need to keep clearly in view the goals that brought them to the university. If they learn to organize their time and to apply themselves, their chances of success are excellent. In addition, the Sabbath will provide them with a welcome break that relieves pressure and creates a context for spiritual growth and service to others.

In what ways can the church support our university students?

They need help in their social and intellectual life. Adventist families and the local congregation can sponsor recreational activities for Adventist students. They also need relevant reading material and assistance in obtaining qualified speakers for their rallies and retreats. The local congregation must find ways of involving them in the life of the church.

If we provide intelligent support to our university students, they will become successful Christian professionals who will serve as agents for positive change in society and as leaders in fulfilling the mission of our church.

Humberto M. Rasi