ORBITUARY

Professor Ambrose Eric Onyango Wasunna

Prof Ambrose Eric Onyango Wasunna was born in Maseno on 4th August 1938, as the third child among five brothers and two sisters, to Mzee Haggai and Mama Dursilla Wasunna.

After his Primary education, Ambrose attended Maseno Secondary School from 1954-1958—a school that remained very dear to him throughout his life. He excelled during his secondary education and in 1959 was accepted to join Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, where he studied medicine and graduated in 1965 with a Bachelors degree in Medicine and Surgery, winning both the Medical Ethics Prize and the Best Finalist Prize. Ambrose returned to Kenya, in 1965, for his internship at Kenyatta National Hospital where his efforts earned him The Miller Prize for the Best Houseman.

Ambrose spent four months as a medical officer in Mombasa at the Coast Provincial Hospital before returning to Makerere as an Honorary Demonstrator in Basic Sciences in 1966. In 1967, Ambrose decided that his true vocation was to become a surgeon and so he studied for the Primary of The Royal College of Surgeons of England at Makerere University. Again Ambrose excelled and received the Hallet Prize of the Royal College of Surgeons of England for Outstanding performance. This award is not given routinely, only in exceptional circumstances. Ambrose had to travel to England to accept the accolade in a private ceremony, acknowledging that he was the best candidate in the world that year.
During 1967 and 1968 Ambrose worked as a registrar in Surgery at the Kenyatta National Hospital and received a scholarship to the UK to study for his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons finals in 1968.

Just before he left for the United Kingdom, Ambrose met Marigold Maddox who was working at the Kenyatta National Hospital. It was love at first sight and they corresponded for a year before he returned and married her in December 1969, at All Saints Cathedral, here in Nairobi.

In July 1969, Ambrose was awarded the Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and in December the same year, he was awarded the Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, another rare feat to obtain the two fellowships. In September 1982, he was awarded the Fellowship of the American College of Surgeons.

Later that year, the couple returned to Scotland as Ambrose had been awarded a scholarship for one year of research in Gastroenterology (the study of the digestive system) at the Royal Infirmary, University of Glasgow. The following year Ambrose and Marigold returned to Nairobi with their first child, Lindsey. Ambrose was appointed lecturer in Surgery at the University of Nairobi and he took up his duties in 1971.

Although the University of Glasgow was ready to award Ambrose a Doctor of Medicine degree based on his research and thesis on Duodenal and Gastric Ulcer Treatment, he opted to submit the thesis to the University of Nairobi for the very first ever award of the degree of Doctor of Medicine (MD) in the country, in June 1972.

Their second child, Karen was born in December 1972. The following year, the family moved to Aberdeen where Ambrose worked in the University, department of Surgery. Nicholas, the couple’s third child was born in 1974 and their fourth child, Christian was born in 1975. On their return in 1975, Ambrose was made a full Professor of Surgery- the first African to hold this position and the first Kenyan Chairman of the Department of Surgery. During this period, Ambrose trained, educated, supported, organised, structured and developed the department.

Ambrose was Dean of the faculty of Medicine from 1978-1981. During the period 1983 to 1985, he served on the Board of Management of the Kenya Medical Research Institute. He also served as the Chairman of the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board.

After ten years as Professor of Surgery, Ambrose was rewarded with a year’s sabbatical leave at Harvard University in USA, to commence in January 1985. However, it was discovered that Ambrose had 5 months leave pending and it was during this time that The World Health Organisation made a request for a Consultant Surgeon for five months. He, Marigold and the children were soon on their way to start a new chapter of their lives in Geneva, Switzerland. Ambrose never did get to Harvard, as he became a permanent fixture at the World Health Organisation.

In Geneva, Ambrose rose to the position of Divisional Director until his retirement in 1998. During this period, Ambrose became a prolific writer and he authored and edited many books on General Surgery for Developing countries. These books were translated into many languages and are still used all over the world today by doctors. Ambrose continued as a Consultant to the World Health Organization until now.
Although Ambrose was born into a strong Christian family, he became even more serious about his faith in 1982 and started attending this church, the Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Valley road. In Geneva, he became actively involved in a Pentecostal church, preaching and teaching the word of God. He consolidated his faith and took a correspondence Bachelor of Arts degree in Theology. In 1992, Ambrose helped to establish an international, English speaking church in Geneva and he was a co-pastor until his retirement in 1998. Meanwhile at the World Health Organisation, Ambrose established bible study and prayer groups, even relinquishing his own office for lunchtime fellowship.

Returning to Kenya in 1998, Ambrose and Marigold felt that it was their calling to work amongst the Turkana people. The Full Gospel Church of Kenya, obviously led by The Lord, asked Ambrose if he would help to re-establish one of their hospitals.

On closer inspection, Ambrose discovered that the hospital was based in Southern Turkana and not only that, Finnish missionaries, who had now departed, had developed the area as a mission station with a school, hospital and church. The services were now non-operational, but Ambrose and Marigold knew then that this was God’s perfect plan for their lives. With the support of the Ministry of Health, the couple re-opened the hospital and re-instated the health services, giving a lifeline to whole communities. With the help of family and friends Kappedo now has equipped schools, sponsored children, water filters, medicine and water storage tanks. Ambrose loved Kappedo and its people. He gave his time and professional services, sharing the love of Christ and ministering health and healing. Ambrose was fundamental in the development of Kappedo, supporting the people with their physical, material and spiritual needs.

In 1999, Ambrose returned to his former position as Professor of Surgery, doing what he loved, at the University of Nairobi and at the Kenyatta National Hospital. Ambrose continued to maintain his links with Geneva and the World Health Organisation. He was often called upon to chair conferences and share his expertise as a consultant.

To close, I would like to share Ambrose’s four rules for a happy and fulfilling life. Maybe you will find comfort, inspiration, healing or even a new challenge from them: -

LOVE- Ambrose loved The Lord, his family and his work.
LIVE- Ambrose travelled extensively throughout his life and grabbed every opportunity for himself and his family. He lived each day of his life positively and to the very fullest.
LEARN- Throughout his life, Ambrose never stopped learning and was very up to date with world current affairs medicine and Christianity. Ambrose was close to all his children and interested in their different professions and day-to-day duties and challenges.
LEAVE A LEGACY- Ambrose has left a huge legacy: His work as a surgeon; his work as a mentor and lecturer; his work as an author; his work as a humanitarian; his work as a Christian; his work as a friend and colleague; and of course he was a most devoted husband, an irreplaceable father and adored grandfather.

May His Soul Rest in Eternal Peace.

Prof. Joseph Oliech, Professor of Surgery,
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