

# *Rabbit City*

♦ *KAMPALA, Uganda*

Good grief. Just when you thought you knew the rules around here, where it's a given that cultural change is painfully slow, along comes a curve ball that really makes your head spin.

The latest loopy news comes from Jinja. The Ugandan burg near my home, known to tourists as the source of the Nile River, is apparently to be nicknamed Rabbit City.

This, after a Chinese health company visited with its sex-enhancing drugs, which led to Jinja's mayor telling residents to reproduce "like rabbits" in order for Jinja to triple its size to 500,000 and acquire formal city status.

You may find this strange, considering that—unlike western countries like Canada facing a birth dearth—many African nations already have a crushing number of youth. In Uganda, almost three in five folks are under 18, and Ugandan women still have, on average, seven kids.

Even though president Yoweri Museveni wants Uganda to emulate China in its rising economy, he likes his country's sky-high growth rate. Uganda currently has a population of 25 million which is set become 180 million by 2050.

Gulp. Apparently the obvious questions about food and education and healthcare and employment aren't coming to mind. Nor, apparently, does anyone seem too concerned if proliferating like rabbits will leave enough water to drink, never-mind worrying about irrigation, hydro, or the family car.

In fact, 10 countries along the 6,000 km Nile River basin—nations expected to double in size in 20 years—are facing a water crisis. One cause is deforestation (all that wood is used for cooking) which hinders rain cycles and causes drought.

Yemen, where I lived previously, is another country among the world's fastest growing, and driest. That's strange seeing as a country like Yemen is thoroughly Muslim while Uganda and much of East Africa is strongly Christian.

So guidance on all this is not coming from the world's two largest faiths. Why not?

Muslims have traditionally believed spreading Islam is dependant on having large families. Have more kids, spread the faith faster. At the same time, raise your personal value and family honour within the community.

Meanwhile some Christians, certainly in Africa, have rather wonky ideas about birth control. Take a recent Christian marriage seminar I attended. One Ugandan participant said since no form of birth control is "safe," none should be practiced. Period.

To which my wife, an obstetrician and mother of our two children, replied, "Life isn't safe." (Neither, by the way, is pregnancy, especially in the developing world.)

Of course life isn't meant to be safe. It's meant to be an adventure where we make decisions with a sense of stewardship and partnership with our Creator, not with blind or fearful obedience to out-of-context commands. Remember, Genesis' "Be fruitful and multiply" was given to specific people, in a specific time, for a specific reason. It's about as applicable to us as "Go forth to the mountain and sacrifice your only son."

True, as the Psalmist says, children are a gift from God: a very beautiful gift that westerners can easily miss when distracted by cultural trappings of so-called success. Planning for children is not only a personal issue, to be worked-out privately and thoughtfully within the home, it's also one that's deeply spiritual.

But if gluttony can come from the gift of food and if drunkenness can come from the gift of wine, then overpopulation and the suffering it brings much of our planet can come from overindulging in children. Children are simply not meant to satisfy our deepest longings. God is.

This issue won't go away. The planet is on pace to grow to nine billion souls by 2050. Expect various wars over limited resources like water. In places like Africa, expect these conflicts to exacerbate politico-religious strife—not to mention poverty, disease and ironically, the death of innocent children first.

Canada, which has one-fifth of the world's fresh water, will likely just be a spectator. And a rather comfortable one at that. But it can always export its Living Water. That, after all, is what's really needed around here. Or anywhere.