

UGANDA DIARY

It was a 35-hour trip from the time I left our home in Butler, PA on Friday morning until I arrived at my hotel in Jinja on Sunday morning. Fortunately, I was able to sleep a few times on the flights, so I at least had 4-5 hours of sleep. Rev. Peter Maganda, Dean of the Eastern Deanery and Dean of Students at the Lutheran Theological College, and Shadrack Okello, the bishop's personal driver, met me at Entebbe Airport. Shadrack drove us to the Jinja City Hotel in the city of Jinja. The hotel is used extensively by the bishop, other church leaders and guests of the Lutheran Church of Uganda.

Jinja is Uganda's second largest city and is located on the north shore of Lake Victoria and the east bank of the Nile river, where the Nile starts to flow out of the lake; Jinja therefore is known as the source of the Nile.

Sunday, January 13

I had breakfast with Fred Magezi at the Jinja City Hotel. Fred is the head of laity for the Lutheran Church of Uganda, Vice Chairman of the board of the LCU and also in charge of education. He was very happy that LLR is here and is looking forward to a continuing partnership with us. I also had the opportunity at the hotel to meet Bishop Charles Bameka, who is bishop of the LCU, who also was very appreciative of our presence here.

It might be good to mention here that the LCU was formed in 1994 and since that time has grown to 141 congregations, with a membership of over 50,000.

That morning Fred Magezi, Shadrack Okello and I drove to Our Savior Lutheran Church, Magamaga, where Pastor Peter led worship and preached. This congregation worships at the Lutheran Theological College and is the site of the first Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend in Uganda, which was held last September.

After morning worship we met with congregational leaders. What I learned is that this congregation is the only church in the area that worships in the local language, which is Lusoga, and this is one of the reasons why they are growing, as many local people in the area do not speak English and like to worship in their native language. Many of the women are involved in evangelism, including knocking on doors and inviting people to church. They also have been instructed in Luther's Small Catechism, so that they feel comfortable answering questions that people ask them. I learned that the evangelism efforts were going on prior to the LLR Weekend but have increased since then. I also learned that the LLR Weekend was very helpful in building Christian community so that people are more open to praying for and ministering to each other. I also should mention that we were the only people who drove to church, everyone else walked, and many people had small children.

You also may be interested to know that Magamaga is about 50% Muslim and that some Muslims have converted to Christianity as a result of the evangelism efforts of this church.

The Lutheran Theological College was built in 2016 and consists of four large buildings. After worship I was given a tour by Pastor Peter. Two of the buildings are mostly finished on the outside and inside, one is mostly unfinished inside and out (this is where they worship on Sunday and where we held the renewal conference later in the week). Some American congregations donated a lot of the construction money but the LCU does not have enough funding to finish the project. They do have a dormitory

building which can house as many as 80, with 4 to a room, and they do have some offices in the main building.

In addition to serving as Pastor of this congregation and Dean of the Eastern District, Pastor Peter also serves as Dean of Students of the college. Currently they have 58 students, who are still away on Christmas break right now. The college has a big library room in one of the mostly finished buildings but right now it's empty and there are not even any bookshelves in the room. In addition, they desperately need books for the seminary.

Seminarians do not pay for tuition, room or board, as very few would be able to afford it. The cost to the LCU for a seminarian is \$2,500.00 per year. The LCU has received donations, many from American churches, to cover the cost of 18 of 58 current students and the church pays for the rest.



The congregation of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Magamaga after Sunday worship

Later in the evening I had a beer at the hotel with Pastor Peter and Fred, along with extensive conversation. Of course, we had to drink Nile Beer, which is brewed in Jinja and is very good.

Monday, January 14, 2019

Pastor Peter, Thomas Ochaya, Shadrack Okello and I drove to Mafubira, just outside of Jinja, where a Lutheran congregation meets to worship on Sunday at the Mufubira Comprehensive School. Interestingly, the school is a Muslim school but the principal is a Christian woman. We met with her

and some lay leaders. Many children also were present and sang us a welcome song. Children are still on Christmas holiday until February 4.



After the meeting with church leaders at Mufubira Lutheran Church

From Mufubira we went to Kamuli town, where a joint educational conference with Lutherans and Anglicans was going on Monday and Tuesday. The LCU is holding these educational conferences in all seven deaneries for teachers and other church leaders. We were given a very warm greeting, introduced and each was asked to speak and greet the people attending. We also had the opportunity to meet several church leaders who were outside.



Rev. Peter Maganda and I speak to the attendees of the Education Conference

Next stop was the very remote village of Batayunjwa and a woman named Edith joined us for the drive. Edith is the head of women's ministry for the deanery. We drove about 40 miles north on a two-lane dirt road and then turned off on a one lane dirt road and drove a few more miles to the Lutheran church and school, which is near Lake Kyoga. Along the way we passed many villages where people live in small round huts, some made of brick and some of mud clay, but nearly all with thatched roofs.

There were only a few wells along the way, and we passed many people, mostly children, riding their bicycles with two or three water jugs tied to them. These water jugs looked to hold 4-5 gallons each, so would be very heavy when full. Three five-gallon jugs would weigh about 150 lbs. The children were either on the way to or from the nearest well and some of them looked to be as young as 8 or 9. The area is pretty flat but even a slight incline was too difficult to ride up with full jugs so the children had to push their bikes up hill. This is probably a daily routine and can be many miles each way.

The congregation has two school buildings but no separate church building, so the people worship in the school. Pastor Peter was there to meet with church leaders and receive a report from them. There were a lot of children and adults there when we arrived and they gave us a joyous greeting. Edith is from this village so they were delighted to welcome her back.

We had a big meeting under a large shade tree but before the meeting started, the children sang us some welcome songs. It's a custom in Uganda to provide entertainment and food for visitors. Next, one of the older women wrapped a sash around one of the girls, and the girl danced for us, then she was joined by the rest of the girls. Then another older woman came over to me and wrapped her sash around my waist. I got the message right away and stood up and danced with the girls. While the dancing was going on a teen boy and a young man played the drums, while the women sang their approval.



Dancing under the shade tree with the children

At the meeting, a few church leaders and a local government official spoke, who thanked Pastor Peter for bringing a Muzungu (white man) with him, as many of their children had never seen a Muzungu before. I noticed that many of the younger children stared at me almost the whole time we were there and I suppose that is the reason why. When it was my turn to speak Pastor Peter translated, as most people in Butayunjwa do not speak English. One of the things I told them is that I was honored to be the first Muzungu many of their children had ever seen and at every church where I spoke, I said that I was bringing greetings from brother and sister Lutherans in America.



Meeting with church leaders in Butayunjwa. One of the school buildings is in the background.

The women prepared a meal for us to eat after the meeting and we also got a tour of the school. The school here goes only up to grade 7 and if the children want to go to school after that they have to either walk or ride bicycles five miles to the nearest school.

They church has a lot of land here but not the funds to build a church on the property, which the people really want to do. When we were leaving, the local government official asked me to move here and said I could build a house on the church property in front of the school.

We picked up Pastor Emanuel and another church leader back where the education conference was going on in Kamuli and the next stop was Buzibirira. We turned off a paved road and drove a quarter mile back a one lane dirt road. When we came around the bend there was a crowd of over 100 waiting to greet us at the church. Probably over 70 were children and they started yelling in excitement. The greeting we received was incredible. After we eventually sat down the children sang songs of welcome

and then the girls danced, accompanied by young men playing drums. Thomas Ochaya warned me in advance to be prepared to dance again. Sure enough, Edith came over and wrapped her sash around my waist so I got up to dance with the girls. Later Pastor Peter told me I was now dancing like an African. We had another meeting with church leaders giving reports and the local government official, this time a woman, welcoming us and telling everyone how important the church is and what an impact it's having on their community. The meeting was followed by more dancing.

This congregation has a small, temporary church on Pastor Emanuel's property until they have the funds to buy some land and build their own church. Most of the congregation has to sit outside on Sunday to listen to the liturgy and preaching.



The local government official welcomes us. Behind her is the temporary church building.



Dancing with the girls

Tuesday, January 15, 2019

We drove to the remote village of Naikiri to visit the church and receive reports from the leadership. As we drove up the dirt road to the church entrance, there were about 35 young children standing at the entrance waiting for us. When they saw our truck approaching, they started yelling and waving to us. They followed the truck to where we parked and stood there to shake hands and welcome us.

We met under a large shade tree, where the children sang songs of welcome and then some of the girls started to dance while the rest of the children sang and a few men played the drums. Of course, I was once again invited to dance with the girls as the women sang their approval and the men played the drums. This was followed by the welcome and meeting with church leaders and a welcome from the local government official. Afterward we toured the facilities. The LCU has a school building but no separate church, so they hold worship services in the school. The vicar of this church is named Grace and he and I became good friends, as he also attended the three-day renewal conference and we were able to talk several times.



Vicar Grace addresses his congregation



The school, which also is used for Sunday worship



The girls dance for the visitors



The congregation and visitors in front of the school

The next stop was at a nearby church where Grace also is the vicar. This congregation dates to 1994, when the LCU was founded, and is one of the oldest Lutheran churches in Uganda. The congregation has a large church building and we met inside. First of course was the welcome, with singing and

dancing by the children. Then one of the young men danced and he was a great dancer. I was thinking that I was so glad that I didn't have to get up and dance following him but I was wrong. He danced over to where Rev. Peter and I were sitting and we both stood up. Then the man danced in front of me and Peter told me to expect to dance. Sure enough, one of the women came over and wrapped her sash around my waist and it was time to dance again. Certainly, my dancing does not compare favorably but still the congregation was thrilled to see the two of us dance. At the meeting with congregation leaders the local government official who spoke was the local police officer, who is named Sylvia.



When we leave these congregations, we always sing a song call Tunawe Onga, which means see you later. It is a beautiful song that Rev. Peter wrote himself and has taught to the congregations in his deanery. When we walked back to our truck dozens of young children came over to shake hands with me and say "bye." I'm guessing that most of them had never seen a Muzungu before. One little girl, who looked to be only four years old, said, "God bless you." I was so surprised and touched because I didn't expect the young children to speak any English so I told her, "God bless you too."

Next stop was Nawankompe Lutheran Church, in another remote village, where a Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend was held in November. We had the customary singing and dancing, and then meeting with the church leaders. When I spoke, I told them their church is becoming well known in the U. S. because we featured their renewal weekend, with photos, in our January newsletter and our

newsletter is sent out to hundreds of pastors and other church leaders in the U.S. The people were absolutely thrilled to hear this.

From Nawankompe we drove to Iganga, where we visited Trinity Lutheran Church. This church is the site of a Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend that was held last October. Iganga is a large town on the Trans African Highway and is about 75% Muslim. Once again, the school was built first and the church meets in the school. There was a smaller group to meet us, as we arrived late in the day. Richard Okello is the chairman of the church and a strong lay leader. Several teenaged boys were at this meeting who also attended our Renewal Conference. When I spoke, I also told this congregation that their church is becoming well known in the U. S., as we had photos and an article about their Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend in our November newsletter. These people also were thrilled to hear this.

Wednesday through Friday, January 16-18

On Wednesday and Thursday a Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend program was held at the Lutheran Theological College in Magamaga and was attended by about 80 lay people, pastors, vicars and seminarians from many congregations in the Eastern Deanery. I should mention that because most of the people were either not fluent in English, or speak no English, that everything over the next three days had to be translated from English to Lugosa or Lugosa to English. Of course, this makes all of the general sessions take twice as long, although the small groups spoke in Lugosa, except for one that was in English.

After morning devotions, we had introductions and three very good testimonies, followed by small groups using our Friday evening small group discussion questions. Of course, we also received reports from every small group afterwards.

Next, we did our Saturday morning meditation and small group discussions. Later in the afternoon we had separate large group discussions for the women and men. Part way through we had a heavy downpour that lasted about 30 minutes and we had to discontinue the discussions during this time, as the heavy rain makes too much noise on the corrugated metal roof to hear people speak. After the rain stopped, we did have time for more discussion; however, Richard Okello, who led the men's group, told me later that he would like to continue the discussion the next day. I should also mention that Rev. James Okello Odoo and Fred Magezi stopped by to visit in the afternoon.

I talked to the leader of the women's group the next morning and she too said the women would like more time together. After morning devotions, I gave the women and men an extra 30 minutes but it turned into 100 minutes before we finished. What was going on in these groups was too good and too important to try to stop.

At our first morning break I mentioned that I brought cards with me with my contact information and would be happy to give a card to anyone who would like one. I brought a very large stack of business cards with me but was surprised to have dozens of people immediately come over to ask for one. I'm guessing that almost everyone in the room wanted to have my contact info to keep in touch. Some are already friends on Facebook.

Later we did the Spiritual Autobiography small group exercise and these too took much longer than I expected, which is good because it means that people are enjoying the groups and having lots of good discussion.



Small group session during the Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend program

We finished the renewal weekend program late Thursday afternoon with feedback from the attendees, asking what they got out of the program and what it meant to them. We had lots and lots of good discussion. One man, who looked to be about 60 years old, had some very good comments and then told everyone he had seen Muzungus from a distance before but had never seen a Muzungu up close or met one until this conference. During this discussion time Bishop Bameka and Rev. James Okello Odoo stopped by to greet everyone. We continued our discussion on the benefits of the renewal weekend and then I asked if people thought a Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend would benefit their own congregations. The answer was a unanimous yes.

On Friday we spent the day doing our 7 Steps for Living the Spiritual Life retreat, which was very well received, and we had time for lots of questions and discussion. There were many more questions than I have ever received in an American Lutheran congregation and we could have had lots more discussion, but we eventually ran out of time when it was time to eat lunch, which was usually somewhere around 3:00.

After our lunch break we had a Divine Service, which was celebrated by Bishop Charles Bameka. The service was in Lugosa but at least six times in the bishop's sermon I heard the words Lutheran Lay Renewal or Lay Renewal Weekend. Afterwards, Bishop Bameka, Rev. Peter and Rev. James all spoke and all said they were very grateful for the renewal conference.



Bishop Charles Bameka preaches during the closing worship service

I was asked to ride back to Jinja with Bishop Bameka, his father, Rev. James and a woman named Jennifer, who is training at the Lutheran Seminary in Kenya to become a deaconess. When her studies are complete, Jennifer will be the first Lutheran deaconess in Uganda. Later in the evening we all got together at the hotel for discussion, although Jennifer could not stay long.

One of the things I learned is that, although the LCU has in the past held a youth conference and conferences for pastors, and is right now holding education conferences around the country for teachers, our renewal conference was the first time they have had a conference for lay people. Church leaders also made it very clear that they have seen the tremendous benefit of this conference and they would like to have more of them in other parts of the country.

Saturday, January 19, 2019

In the morning I had breakfast and talked to Rev. Peter, Rev. James and Fred Magezi, all at different times, then had the rest of the morning free to work on this diary. In the afternoon I went to a wedding with Bishop Bameka, Rev. James and Rev. Peter at Nakabango Lutheran Church, about 10 miles east of Jinja. I didn't know where I should sit so asked Rev. James and he had someone seat me, right in the first row but off to the side. A Lutheran missionary from Milwaukee named Rachel was seated next to me and next to her was Fred Magezi. Rachel teaches religious education in a nearby Lutheran school. So, from the center aisle it was the bride, the maid of honor, two flower girls, another aisle, then the three of us. I really felt uncomfortable sitting in the first row at a wedding for people I don't even know but later found out that visitors are seated up front so they can see what's going on. The hospitality of Ugandans continues to amaze me! About 300 people attended the wedding and It was a wonderful, joyous ceremony. I also saw and talked to many people there who had attended the renewal

conference. The reception was held at a hotel in Jinja so we did not go, but food was provided at the church for the bishop, the pastors and me.

I should mention that after the wedding I was talking to a young woman who had attended the three day renewal conference. One of the many things she told me was that she was so happy that when she left on Friday afternoon her heart was bursting. I couldn't help but think of these words of Jesus: "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"

Sunday, January 20, 2019

Shadrack Okello drove Emmanuel Bameka (father of the bishop) and me out to Trinity Lutheran Church, Iganga to meet Pastor Peter, as he was preaching there. From there we drove north on the back-country dirt roads to the Luuka District, where Bukabooli Lutheran Church, a new church plant, had its first worship service, Pastor Peter presiding. We met outside, under the shade of a jackfruit tree. When we arrived, the children led singing for about 15 minutes. About 20 adults and 35 children were in attendance. This new church plant is the first church of any kind in this village and is being led by Pastor Emmanuel Bwana.



The first worship service at Bukabooli Lutheran Church

After worship there was a congregational meeting; many people spoke and officers were elected. I greeted the congregation on behalf of their brother and sister Lutherans in the USA. The local government official, who is a member of the congregation, was elected chairman. When he spoke, one of the things he said is this was the first time a Muzungu has ever set foot on this land.



The congregation of Bukibooli Lutheran Church, Pastor Emmanuel Bwaana (L) and Dean Peter Maganda (R)

There is an old brick school building behind where we worshiped; the walls are in good shape but it has no roof. The congregation is hopeful that someday they may have the funds to put a roof on the building, so they can both have a school and worship in this building. Until then they will have to worship outside. We got a sprinkling of rain during worship this day but most of the rain missed us. Pastor Emmanuel said he is concerned about what they will do during the rainy season.

They put the offering basket up front and people came forward to give their offerings. Since the basket was almost right in front of me, I couldn't help but notice that two elderly widows offered just a small coin, which reminded me of the story in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12:

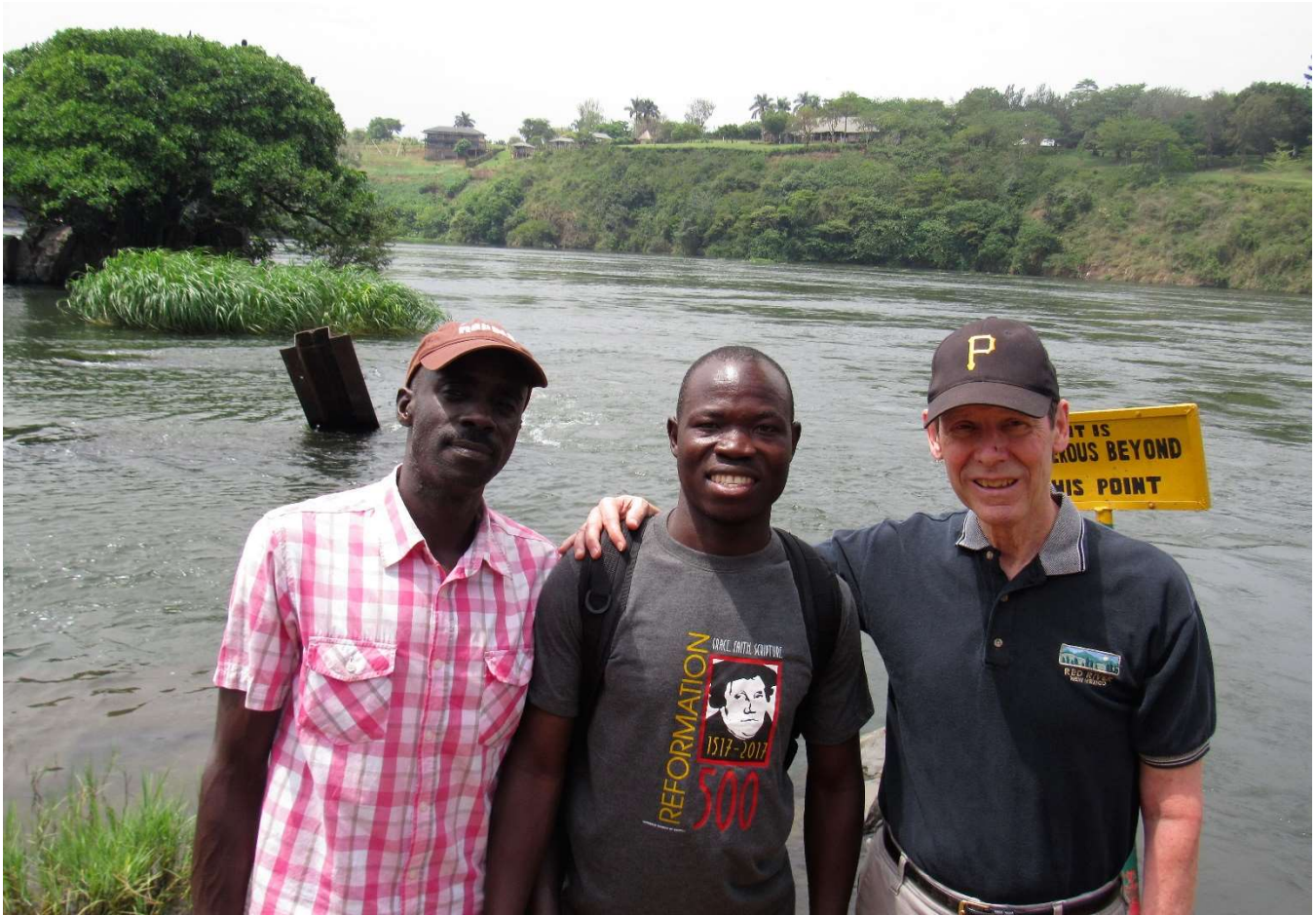
And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

I should mention something about the church planting strategy of the LCU. They are planting churches in villages where there are no other churches, and where most people do not speak English, and allowing people to worship in their own native language, which in this part of Uganda is Lusoga. Many times they also plant a school first and then form a congregation that worships in the school. It appears to me to be a wise and very successful strategy.

On Sunday evening, Pastor Peter, Shadrack and I went out to dinner.

Monday, January 21, 2019

Pastor Peter and Shadrack Okello took me to Source of the Nile Park in Jinja, which was just a few minutes' drive from my hotel, where we took a half hour boat ride to the spot where water starts to flow out of Lake Victoria into the Nile River.



From Jinja we drove to Kampala, where we were invited to have a delicious dinner with Bishop Charles Bameka, his wife Eve and her brother Ronald. Later that evening Ronald drove us to the Entebbe airport to begin my long journey home.

Closing Thoughts

There are a few things that strike a visitor most about Uganda. First is the poverty, as it ranks #25 on the list of poorest countries in the world. About 38% of the population live on less than \$1.25 per day. Next, however, is how wonderful the people are. I have never been around people who are more hospitable, welcoming, gracious, generous, friendly, kind, appreciative and joyful. Ugandan Lutherans may be poor in financial resources but they are rich and overflowing in faith, in the joy of the Lord and the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

What impresses me most about the Lutheran Church of Uganda though, is how much the church is accomplishing with so little in financial resources. Church leaders such as Bishop Charles Bameka, Pastors Peter Maganda, James Okello Odoo and so many others, are working tirelessly to grow the church; teaching, preaching, visiting, encouraging and equipping the saints. I should also mention that pastors in the LCU do not get paid a salary, their congregations are too poor to support a pastor, so they are expected to support themselves and most do so by growing and selling crops. Yet in spite of this difficult challenge, there are 58 students in the Lutheran Theological College studying for ministry.

Request for Resources

One of the greatest needs in the LCU right now is books for the Lutheran Theological College. Anyone who would be willing to donate books, or funds to purchase books, please contact me.

Of course, financial resources also are greatly needed: to purchase land, to build schools and churches, to finish the seminary buildings and other building projects, and to pay for scholarships for seminarians. Children's clothes are needed in many rural villages and there also is a need for musical instruments. Again, anyone who is willing to help please contact me.

Financial resources also are needed for water projects. As mentioned earlier, children in rural villages ride their bicycles many miles to the nearest well every day to pump water to bring back to their homes. People in these villages don't have the financial resources to buy an automobile, and few have even a motorbike. In the remote village of Butayunjwa on Lake Kyoga, people share their water source with animals.

Finally, I want to say that it was a privilege and an honor for me to serve alongside such dedicated Christian leaders and I look forward to my next visit to Uganda.

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