

# Ebola Hits Home For Liberian Faith Healer

BY ROBYN DIXON

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MONROVIA, Liberia — It could be headaches, infertility, sorrow or bad luck. In New Kru Town, where the afflictions of the poor are plenty, there was always work for a prayer warrior like Dorothy Sawyer.

People with nightmares would come to the faith healer, convinced that they were under attack as they slept. Once, a girl named Gladys took to running around the neighborhood naked and had to be saved. Some people were sick, and needed healing. Others had just lost their way in life.

Sawyer would hold their hands, hard, to make the prayer powerful.

"Sometimes I pray loud," she says. "Sometimes I pray louder."

Sawyer, an abandoned wife with six children — the child of an abandoned wife with five children — lives in a one-room tin house with holes in the walls in this crowded neighborhood of the Liberian capital.

It's a place where lines of colorful laundry flap like extravagant birds, stray dogs nose around for scraps and people dress up in lace for church on Sundays.

Sawyer is a prayer warrior for a church called Conqueror's Tabernacle. Save for the miracles that she trades in, life could be disheartening for a woman with nothing but a dog-eared Bible and even less money than she used to have.

Sawyer sees it as a biblical test.

If so, it's been a long one, and it hasn't been easy.

"My neighbors get vexed. They get angry," the 48-year-old says with a defiant, gap-toothed smile. "People laugh at me and mock me. They say, 'Every day, it's God, God, God business.' These neighbors say that's all they hear."

But a prayer warrior fears nothing — not ridicule, not spiritual darkness, not the witches waiting to steal the souls of children or weak old folk.

Then Ebola came to New Kru Town, and it attacked Conqueror's Tabernacle.

Here in Monrovia, where charismatic Pentecostal pastors jostle for worshippers, church and prayer course through life like blood, and prayer warriors are as important as doctors. For churchgoers here, an ailment that's stubborn is often seen as the business of a prayer warrior, who claims to heal through the "laying of hands."

But Ebola can be contracted just by touching someone very ill. It lurks in bodily fluids such as sweat and is believed to survive on surfaces for hours and in clothing for days. The virus has claimed many pastors, prayer warriors and traditional healers.

"Only God knows where we are heading to now," Sawyer says.

On a rain-streaked afternoon, she sits in a red-and-white floral dress on a stool outside her house holding her old Bible. A cheap metal pendant inscribed "Love" is stuck in the damp sand nearby. Tim, 25, her oldest son, is there; he is the rock in her life since her husband deserted her eight years ago. Her other five children, ages 11 and up, sit giggling, or wander around.

When Sawyer was about 10, she says, she saw a flash of light — she points to the spot, just over there — and a white man with long hair appeared out of nowhere, his back turned. Then he disappeared in another flash.

"I believe that was the angel of God that I saw," she



Dorothy Sawyer is a Liberian prayer warrior, pictured here in September 2014, and her most treasured possess is her dog-eared Bible. The faith healer was called to help victims of Ebola and it wasn't long before she got sick too.

says, eyes wary, half expecting ridicule. From then on, she had "spiritual fits" and had to drop out of school.

She had premonitions. She'd warn people not to take a particular road on a particular day.

"People didn't listen. There would be consequences." (She says her former husband was attacked by thieves after ignoring one of her warnings.)

But other people saw her as a miracle worker. No longer just a struggling single mother, she was somebody. "They said, 'She's got the discernment.'"

Four years ago she became a prayer warrior at Conqueror's Tabernacle, the creation of her neighbor Pastor Varney Garpou.

Ebola first skipped across the border into Liberia in March, then died down after a few cases. Everyone relaxed. But by July it had swept back in, killing staff members at New Kru Town's Redemption Hospital before tearing through the neighborhood.

As lethal as war, it spread across Monrovia, killing nearly 2,500 people by Oct. 17. The cases in West Africa will surpass 10,000 within weeks.

Many people struggle to reconcile their religious faith with the plague. Some churchgoers say it's a sign of the "Last Days." Some say it's a punishment, or something Satan brought. Sawyer was sure

with this Ebola thing.' He warned her, 'Be careful.' She said, 'You people think everything now is this Ebola thing,' Sawyer says.

That month, the virus came to a rundown tenant house next door to the Garpous. First to go was a mother of three, who died in a wheelbarrow on the way to treatment. Her children were sent

ing and night. She helped her dress, and she touched her feet. But Willet died at home, and within days, Sawyer was called again, this time to pray for and heal the pastor.

Despite her strongest prayers, he died at home, crying that he didn't want to go and leave his vision of Conqueror's Tabernacle.

"I believe maybe it's God's will," says Sawyer, puzzling over why so many died and wondering why all that healing prayer didn't save a good man like Pastor Garpou. "Maybe some people never had the faith that they could make it and some people lose hope."

A short time after, Sawyer felt a searing heat in her belly. She fasted and prayed for three days, but it didn't help. Eventually, she left her children in the care of her son and went to an Ebola treatment unit.

Soon her test confirmed a result that would terrify most people. It was Ebola.

Sawyer says she felt no fear or doubt. She was determined that with plenty of

**"Even as a prayer warrior, people don't come close to me because of Ebola. People are afraid. But I'm not sad. I'm active! I'll go to other churches."**

## DOROTHY SAWER

it was a spiritual disease, not just a physical sickness.

Although she had heard the government warnings not to touch people with Ebola, "I wasn't afraid because I believed God was with me."

It was unthinkable that the illness people call "this Ebola thing" could be stronger than a prayer warrior.

Even so, Pastor Garpou was wary. He told his wife, Willet, a nurse, to slow down on her treatment of neighbors. By August, people were coming knocking three or four times a day looking for medicine.

"Pastor said, 'Be careful

to an Ebola care unit. Four people in the house died, including a tailor and his child. The tailor's wife was next to sicken.

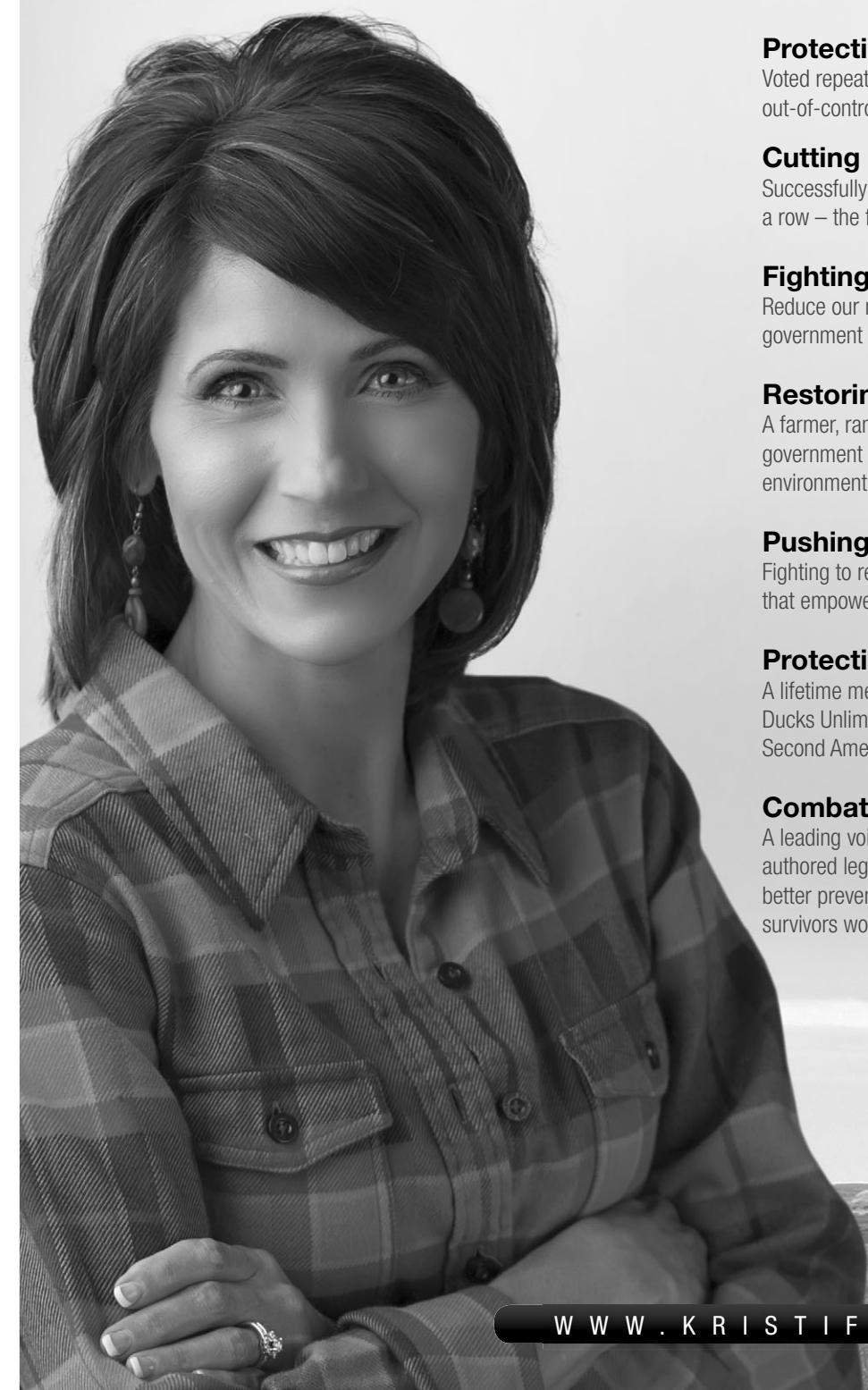
Willet Garpou couldn't just sit in her house and let the woman die, so she treated her with injections for a week. Two weeks later, Willet got sick too.

Sawyer didn't hesitate when Willet, her "church mother," called her to say she'd had a revelation in a dream that people wanted to kill her and the pastor.

Sawyer clutched her hands and prayed with Willet, morn-

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