Report on a visit to the Methodist Church in Uganda

Dr Richard Vautrey, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference

2-4th January 2010

Introduction

Uganda is a developing country with one of the world’s most rapidly increasing populations. It is estimated to double from 25 million by 2025. The population is young with more than half below 18 years. The country is now stable and peaceful after years of internal strife and misrule and more recently conflict spilling over from neighbouring Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Although poverty has been reduced in Uganda, roughly 38% of the population lives in absolute poverty (down from over 50% in the early 90s). Factors contributing to the persistence of poverty include the high population growth rate, dependence on low productivity subsistence agriculture, inequitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Ugandan government estimates indicate that about 4 million children in Uganda (constituting half of the total child population) are vulnerable and live in difficult circumstances.

English Protestant (mainly led by the Church Missionary Society) and French Catholic (White Fathers) mission organisations first arrived in Uganda towards the end of the nineteenth century and the Church of Uganda and Catholic Churches remain the predominate Christian denominations. However independent Pentecostal churches are increasingly popular. There is also a large Islamic community and a small re-emerging Asian Hindu community.

In 1986 a small group of people from the Jinja area who had been meeting together for fellowship with the support of a United Methodist minister invited the Methodist Church in Kenya to help them establish a Methodist Church in their area. 24 years later there are now around 4000 members in 34 congregations spread across 3 circuits and supported by 5 ministers and a growing number of lay pastors.

Methodist Church in Uganda

Chairman and Superintendent minister of the 3 Methodist Circuits in Jinja, Kamuli and Iganga is Rev Amooti Bagambi and I spent two days with him and his colleagues visiting the Church. I was accompanied by my wife Anne and two sons. I also met 3 of the other 4 ministers, a number of lay pastors and the 2 development workers that have been employed to help develop and realise a 5 year strategic plan. The central hope of the plan is the establishment of a Ugandan Synod within the Kenyan Methodist Church and ultimately an autonomous Methodist Church in Uganda.

This young and growing Methodist Church in Uganda is currently part of the Synod of Nairobi and all its ministers have been trained in Kenya. However few of the many lay pastors, Sunday school teachers and church leaders have received significant
training and we were shown the land in the small town of Kamuli that has just been acquired with the hope of building a lay training centre on it. Later in the day we were also shown another newly acquired plot of land that they hoped to build a guest house on, in the hope that it would provide much needed income to support the work of the Church. This was just one of a number of signs of how seriously the Church is taking the issue of financial independence.

I had the privilege to hand over a new motorbike to Thomas Kibalya, one of the local preachers and pastors who is based in a rural area. Previously he had been making do with a bicycle but as the distances between congregations grew this was becoming more difficult for him. The motorbike, provided with the help of funds from the Irish Methodist Church, will help him to get around the rough rural roads far more effectively.

The Irish Methodist Church has strong links with the Methodist Church in Uganda. They have provided much needed resources as well as offering individual skills through regular visits of mission groups. These have been very much appreciated by the Church in Uganda.

I visited the main church of the Kamuli circuit, and the home of Rev David Ntogohoyya and his family. We were met by other members of the church including two local preachers who were helping to build the new Sunday school. This will not only be used by the large number of children who come on a Sunday, but also as a community centre during the week. They have also developed a library for community use and buildings for chickens and pigs which will help supplement the Circuit income.

The church is built at the point of the road north where the electricity supply stops and so people come from miles around to watch the television (English Premiership football is particularly popular) and charge their mobile phones. It is also next to the local borehole which was dug with the support of money from the Methodist Church in Britain.

I was next taken to the rural area around Butangala where we were enthusiastically welcomed by the local congregation and local minister Rev Richard Kyaira. There are 4 Methodist churches in this area and the hope is that it will soon develop into a new mission circuit.

On the way back to Jinja we stopped at Mpumudde Methodist Church which is next to a primary school run by the Church. The large church was built 7 years ago, with help from the Irish Methodist Church. Previously the congregation of around 70 adults and 80 children had worshiped in the school and before that in a rented building nearby. We were met by local pastor Nathaniel and Jonathan who works at the school as well as members of the Women’s Fellowship. Wall hangings in the church gave further witness to the significant support Irish Methodists have given, and continue to give to their brothers and sisters in Uganda.

The school has 35 teachers, 28 paid by the local government and the remaining teachers paid for by the Church. The number of children at the school has rapidly increased to 1500 with a large influx of children who have fled with their families
from the conflict on the northern border area with Sudan. We were told that these refugees had been welcomed and supported, although it was likely that now the situation in the north is more peaceful they may start to return. It means that whereas class sizes were at the Government maximum of 53 children per teacher, they had increased to over 100 children per class. Basic temporary buildings had been put up to cope with the numbers, but a new 2 storey block was also being built to give much needed extra classrooms.

Back in the Jinja circuit we were welcomed to Bugembe Methodist Church, the first to be built in the area and the home church of Superintendent minister Rev Amooti Bagambi and his family. We were entertained with singing and presented with African-style shirts and clothes. I brought the greetings of the Methodist Church in Britain.

On Sunday morning we returned to Bugembe were I was invited to preach to a full church. After the service we visited Bugembe Prison which houses around 50 prisoners including 5 women with 2 young children. Up to 40 men sleep on the floor in one dormitory. Members of the Church visit twice a week to lead bible studies and a weekly service in the small chapel. They have also brought sleeping mats, helped to install doors to the toilets in order to help restore a little dignity and privacy and had brought meals for the prisoners on Christmas Day. We shared in worship together and again I was able to bring greetings from Methodists in Britain as well as reflecting on the gospel lesson for the day. We left the women some much needed sanitary products that the war had asked for.

3 years ago, Rev Margaret Nakaluuba, the only woman minister in the Methodist Church in Uganda and who currently has oversight of churches in the Iganga circuit, saw the need for an orphanage in her area. As I travelled in Uganda I saw evidence of a large number of orphanages, a sad sign of the impact of HIV/AIDS and the relatively high maternal mortality rate in rural areas. However the Ugandan government is now actively discouraging the development of orphanages as the philosophy is that no African child should be seen as an orphan as all are members of an extended family and should be cared for by them.

The intention now is to develop a children’s centre with a focus on providing short-term care for children that have suffered abuse. Sexual abuse of children is now increasingly recognised in Uganda and the intention is that the children’s centre would provide a safe place for children. A building has also been partly built with the intention of using it for a children’s health clinic.

Currently the centre is home for 32 children. The centre has a matron and a cook and Rev Margaret Nakaluuba acts as chaplain, and it is struggling from a significant lack of resources. Most of the children had returned to extended families during what was a holiday period at the time of our visit, although those children that could not return were being looked after by various members of the Church.

Earlier this year, Dr Lisa Matthison, a child psychologist and play therapist with dual Canadian-Scottish nationality, learnt about the children’s centre from a Ugandan minister who is currently working in Scotland. She has volunteered to provide support to the centre for a year, although since arriving she has realised that she may
need to stay longer. She currently receives a small amount of funding from two individual donors. She was not a Methodist by background but has joined the church at Bugembe and has been warmly welcomed by the local community.

There have been concerns about the governance arrangements of the centre. These concerns are now being addressed with the help of two development officers employed by the Church. They hope that with Dr Matthison’s help they should be able to secure a more reliable source of income to support this important work.

I met Alex Kyabawampi and Ezekiel Kisambira who have been employed as development officers by the Church. They have helped the Church to produce a strategic plan and put the administration and governance of this emerging Church on a sound footing. I was provided with 3 years audited accounts. They’ve also helped to articulate the ambitious plans the Church have for new outreach, community projects and the ultimate aim of a self-sufficient and autonomous Methodist Church in Uganda.