

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Back-to-school missionaries given even tougher mission



GRAEME COUSINS finds out about the efforts of missionaries from Ulster in lockdown in the east African nation of Uganda



Building a school in a developing country is a tough enough task, but with the world in lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic a group of missionaries from Northern Ireland have shifted their focus to feeding the starving.

Uganda, like most other countries, is on lockdown, though the east African nation is yet to experience any deaths due to Covid-19.

However, should the virus take hold in Uganda it could have a devastating impact with the health service there unequipped to cope with an outbreak.

Helping to keep Covid-19 at bay are a trio who are connected to the Mission Board of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster.

They are based around 85 miles south of the capital Kampala, and just 20 miles south of the Equator, at the Emmanuel Christian School.

The school principal is Noreen McAfee from Ballymore Free Presbyterian Church

who has over 20 years of experience teaching in Africa – just over 17 years in Kenya and now in Uganda.

Married couple Andrew and Hannah Foster from Comber Free Presbyterian Church are also heavily involved in the school.

Andrew specialises in building work and is also involved in speaking at church meetings and school assemblies. Hannah, who is originally from Holland, helps with the school accounts, the Orphan & Vulnerable Children programme, and conducting meetings for the children.

Andrew said: “We help look after a school of almost 400 children. I take care of the building and maintenance side of things at school while Hannah works in the office and helps the neediest in the local community with small scale projects like giving seed and training to those who are struggling to survive, so that they might grow food for their families to eat and maybe even be able to sell a little of their produce to earn some extra money.”

Of the current situation he said: “Currently the school is closed, which makes the place extremely quiet. Normally the hustle and bustle of the students from seven-ish to five-ish is like a brass band, but now things are eerily quiet.

“And so, through these types of endeavours we seek to preach the gospel or bring the good news to those who will listen.

“What is the good news? It is, ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life’. (John 3:16)

“The pandemic has many in hiding, while others continue on like not much has changed. But to be fair, out in the remote parts where we are, far from a city, the villagers must subsistence farm to survive. So who can blame them.”

Noreen commented: “It is my privilege to share with the staff here in the school the great task of educating the younger generation and teaching them the Word of God.

“The school caters mainly for underprivileged, orphaned and vulnerable children and most of them come from the villages around.

“Usually our school compound is full of life and activity,

School started with 16 pupils

In February 2014 a request to take over the Emmanuel School came to the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster’s Mission Board from Rev Noel Kelly who had founded the school with 16 children in 2002.

After several visits to assess the situation, the school was officially reopened under the Free Presbyterian Mission Society Africa on Sunday, April 30, 2017.

but these days it is abnormally quiet. All our children and young people are at home with parents or caregivers, as are most of our staff.

“Uganda, like much of the world, is in lockdown with the government having introduced 37 different measures to try and curb the spread of Covid-19. These include the closure of all non-essential businesses and services, a ban on public transport and the introduction of a curfew.

“So far, the measures seem to be working – we have 55 confirmed cases of the dis-

ease, no deaths and a number of patients who have already recovered.”

She added: “We are all praying earnestly that God would prevent any greater outbreak of Covid-19 in the country and that we would soon be able to go back to work.

“Many people here live hand to mouth, relying on each day’s income to feed their family the same evening. For them, the threat of starvation is more worrying than the threat of Covid-19.

“As a mission, we have been able to offer some emergency



Principal Noreen McAfee with some of the children from the Emmanuel School



On a mission in Africa

393

Children at FPC school in Uganda

2002

Emmanuel School first set up in Uganda with 16 pupils



Hannah and Andy Foster, a married couple from Comber FPC

3

Missionaries from Free Presbyterian Church help run the school

3 miles

How far away electricity supply previously was



7,800

US dollars, the cost of one of the boreholes

‘The pandemic has many in hiding [in Uganda], while others continue on like not much has changed’

ANDREW FOSTER

food supplies to our closest and neediest neighbours. Last weekend, we distributed 250 food parcels, each containing flour, rice, sugar, salt, cooking oil and soap. They were greatly appreciated by all who received them.

“We trust that God will make us a blessing to many in these difficult days.”

The Free Presbyterian Church Mission Board has a subcommittee – the Ugandan Oversight Subcommittee – chaired by Rev David McMillan, minister of Armagh Free Presbyterian Church.

David said: “We’re in regular contact with our mission-

aries in Uganda. In normal circumstances when the school is operating I would be in almost daily contact with them.

“They would be keeping us updated, particularly at the minute on the situation there.

“They’ve extended their lockdown into early May. Their concern is if it were to get into the country that they wouldn’t be in a position to cope with it with their own health service.”

He said that as well as their efforts in Uganda the Mission Board was involved in aid projects in India, Nepal and Kenya.

Helping those in great need

Having started with just 16 pupils in 2002, there are now 393 children and young people at the Emmanuel school in Nsaalu in the Kalungu district of central Uganda split into nursery, primary and secondary departments.

Chair of the Ugandan Oversight Subcommittee, Rev David McMillan, said: “Most of the children are Ugandans but a few come from other east African

countries such as Tanzania and Rwanda.

“There are 32 Ugandan members of staff at the school along with three missionaries from the FPC Mission Board.”

He said the Mission Board has recently introduced a small pilot Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVC) project to help the families in greatest need in the community.

He said: “The school em-

loys a social worker who visits the families with children at the school to ascertain those in greatest need. He also helps to run the OVC programme at the school.

“There is also a church on the site with two services held each Sunday in addition to a Sunday school and house-to-house outreach on a Sunday afternoon.

“During the week there is a Bible study and prayer meetings.”

Church brings gift of electricity and water to poor community



Aid parcels being prepared for distribution

Several improvements have been made to the school facilities in the last three years, with two of the most important being the provision of electricity and water.

Other improvements include a new kitchen, toilet block, a play park, a screen and projector in the church which doubles up as the school assembly hall, provision of suitable missionary accommodation and a new missionary vehicle.

David Foster said: “The two major projects recently have been to provide two community borewells at the two nearby villages of Nsaalu and Kyambala. Before these borewells were provided most people in the community had to carry water to their homes from the local swamp in plastic jerry cans.”

The borewells cost \$7,800 each and were officially dedicated with a special outreach service at each well on November 19 last year.

The local chairman from each community council unveiled a plaque to mark the occasion and residents from each community were invited to attend.

David said: “These borewells were supplied by the generosity of Christian people in FPCs in Northern Ireland.

“The other major project under way at present is the installation of mains electric at the school.”

He added: “When we took over the school there was no mains electric. We had provided a limited solar electric supply and a generator for the borewell.

“Just last year the Ugandan Electricity Board (Umeme) brought electricity into the community – right past the gates of the school. This was a definite answer to prayer. Before this happened, the nearest electric supply was three miles away.

“A large transformer has now been installed at the school.

“At the end of February, a team of seven people (six men and one woman) from Northern Ireland went out to the school for two weeks to wire the school for mains electric. This is a major piece of work.

“With the school being on the Equator it gets dark every

night all year round at around 6.30 to 7pm. So having electricity will make a major difference to life at the school.”

He added: “A smaller team will return to the school to complete this work when the coronavirus crisis settles down.”

The Mission Board also runs a sponsorship programme for children at the school.

David said: “It costs £120 per year to sponsor a child at the school.

“Many individuals, churches, Sunday schools, children’s meetings, youth fellowships, ladies meetings and even businesses are supporting children through the sponsorship programme.”



An aerial picture of Emmanuel Christian School around three years ago