

Jo Blaker recounts how a miscarriage of justice led to a ministry to prisoners in Uganda

I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO VISIT

key points

- 70% of all prisoners in Uganda are on remand, and many are innocent.
- Support for prisoners is almost non-existent, leading a former remand prisoner to set up a practical Christian response to help deal with the social, spiritual and health issues and help those released re-integrate with society.
- In partnership with PRIME, this ministry is now also training prison officers, pastors and community workers in a whole person model of healthcare to provide essential support to prisoners and their families.

Ten years ago, Godfrey Kule found himself in a Ugandan prison after he was falsely accused of stealing equipment from his office in Kasese. Godfrey had developed a good relationship with his boss and his colleagues were jealous, so they staged a break in and took the equipment, blaming Godfrey for the loss. He was arrested and put in prison for 70 days. While there Godfrey was forced to do hard labour in the fields, was beaten by the guards and had an asthma attack from which he nearly died, because he was not allowed any treatment. He suffered several other 'untold stories'.

However, Godfrey believed God had a purpose for him in his suffering. He befriended his fellow prisoners, most of whom he realised, like him, had not been convicted. (I have been reliably told that up to 70% of prisoners in Uganda are either on remand or innocent and that people can wait many years for their day in court.) Godfrey listened to their stories, learned the language of prison, started Bible studies and resolved to try and improve conditions for them once he was released. In his heart, he set up the Centre for Hope And Life in and After Prison Initiative (CHALAPI) and once

he was released, proved innocent and had forgiven his colleagues, he made CHALAPI a reality.

Using his 'inside' knowledge, Godfrey started by buying telephones for each prison so that prisoners could let their loved ones know where they were, and to allow them to contact a lawyer. In the years since then, CHALAPI has supported children of prisoners with school fees, and arranged training in carpentry, shoe-making and tailoring for those recently released from prison to reduce the need to turn to petty crime. He has also established a school in the main prison, and incarcerated teachers now teach prisoners who have not been able to complete their primary education. The prison is now an official examination centre and several prisoners have the basic education needed to get a job.

Godfrey advises prisoners of their rights through the court process and helps to connect them with potential employers on their release. He has also negotiated the setting up of a small claims court, so instead of being imprisoned for a small debt, people can work to pay it off.

Godfrey is an intelligent, reliable, enthusiastic and well-respected family man, who has made enormous improvements in the lives of prisoners,

ex-prisoners and their families in the last few years. He is very well known in the town and surrounding area for his advocacy for prisoners and has drastically improved local people's attitudes towards them. This has increased prisoner's chances of rehabilitating back into the community on release. Godfrey asks all ex-prisoners to become CHALAPI members. They pay a small fee to fund projects. Godfrey receives no salary for his work but survives on the generosity of others, and his clever use of the little he has.

So why does he do this? Because in Matthew 25:36 it says, 'I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me', and in Hebrews 13:3 '...Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.'

As Christians, we are instructed to look after the needs of the poor and marginalised, and also those in prison. In fact, at least eight of the New Testament books were written from prison, and most of the New Testament writers were jailbirds at one time!

How I met Godfrey

I met Godfrey five years ago, while I was volunteering for a couple of weeks at Kagando Hospital, a small mission hospital near where CHALAPI operates. I had been a nurse for 28 years and was working as a forensic nurse practitioner with the police in Sussex at the time. I found myself drawn to the small prison nearby, and when I heard Godfrey's story, God gave me a desire to help the prisoners. I felt God clearly say, 'this is what I want you to do'.

I had been involved with PRIME International, a healthcare charity, for several years. They teach about the importance of compassionate whole person medicine, taking into consideration the impact of illness on body, mind, spirit, family and community, with the values that Jesus healed people with.

Three years ago, Godfrey and I realised that the healthcare in prisons is poor because the prison officers are not educated in common health conditions, for example Godfrey's asthma. We decided to run a whole person healthcare training course for prison officers to educate them on physical conditions like asthma, the importance of good food and hand hygiene, on mental health issues, on the importance of spiritual care and the impact that being in prison can have on the family. We wrote a three-day programme and in 2017, with a team of three other PRIME tutors, taught around 20 prison officers and some inmates too! Delegates who were initially reluctant to join in soon became involved with the engaging and informal teaching style. We received excellent feedback.

Reports about the training spread, and for the last two years Godfrey and I have run similar workshops with village health workers, pastors and community leaders in the local area. Godfrey translates for me and puts the teaching into a familiar context. These

health workers are mostly untrained and voluntary, but act as the person that people in the village go to for advice if they are sick.

We have now run four lots of two-day workshops in four remote locations and have taught around 150 health workers in all. A 'champion' is identified at each training session, and they are given handouts and encouraged to continue refresher training, and to teach those unable to attend. Initiatives like handwashing stations have been set up outside public toilets. I have been told that in the last year there have been NO cases of cholera in one community because of this. The incidence of diarrhoea and vomiting has also dropped, and this has caught the attention of local public health officials.

One of these groups really wanted some teaching on how to care for someone with a heart attack. As I stood there, on a mountain in a village that it took 40 minutes by taxi motorbike on dirt tracks to reach, with no medication available and the nearest cardiac hospital at least seven hours' drive away in Kampala, I wondered what I could possibly say. I suggested that they could pray for their patient and their family, as this demonstrates compassion, spiritual care, care for their family and care of mental health – whole person healthcare.

To my surprise, they readily agreed that 'yes, they could do this', and the smiles on their faces when they realised that they could help their patient, despite having no medical back up was humbling for me. With all the medical advantages that we have in the developed world, we often forget how vital and powerful prayer can be. They left the training enthused.

Because I still have to work, I can only visit Uganda once a year for three weeks. Even though this is only a short period of time, being able to make such a difference in a community is hugely rewarding for me. I strongly believe in empowering local communities to care for themselves, rather than as an outsider going and telling people what to do.

I feel privileged to have a colleague like Godfrey and thank God for the opportunities he gives us. I never quite know how things are going to work, but God always blesses our efforts and manages to multiply the work of our hands as we lay our plans before him. As Proverbs 16:3 says 'Commit to the Lord whatever you do and he will establish your plans'. God's work can sometimes be very challenging, but we just give him what we have. It is always so exciting to see what God does with it.

Jo Blaker is a registered nurse who now works with a Hospice at Home Team, as a flight nurse and as a PRIME Tutor.

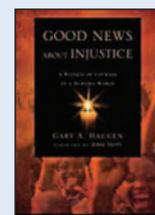
You can read more about CHALAPI at chalapi.com You can read more about the work of PRIME at prime-international.org



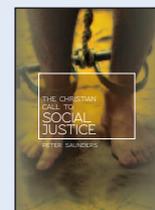
Jo Blaker and Godfrey Kule

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