

Janet Goodall returns to the pearl of Africa after nearly three decades



In 1972, as my hospital contract with the Uganda Government was ending, Idi Amin announced that British people in my position must leave within two weeks. My flight was already booked for that day and I flew out, heading for North Staffordshire, but saddened by what was happening to people I'd come to love. Great trials have hit Uganda since then, not least being the AIDS endemic and, more recently, the massive cult murders and suicides.

Uganda revisited

A few months ago an invitation came to go back to Uganda to give a few talks about the needs of dying and bereaved children, and I've recently returned from that three week visit, made with another medical friend. We found it a sobering, challenging and yet inspiring experience.

President Museveni has made a huge difference to the economic and social stability of the country and publicly expresses sympathy with the Christian faith and witness of his wife. His efforts have helped to release Uganda from payment of its national debt to Britain, following the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Unlike many other African countries, the leaders have been honest enough to face the truth about AIDS and to produce a fall in its incidence, that is except amongst teenage girls. Nevertheless it still remains a terrible scourge and we scarcely met a family who had not lost someone through it. I met many affected children, so teaching about their needs was much needed.

Perhaps the most memorable audience was of hundreds of African grannies, carers, counsellors and children in a packed village schoolroom, convened by World Vision. Without warning, I was asked to 'explain to them about helping grieving children' - through an interpreter, without visual

aids and with no idea of the level of understanding of the listeners! I'd been told that the prevailing attitude seems to be that children, whether sick or sorrowing, do cry a lot - so what? Amongst the crowd was the shining, attentive face of an AIDS counsellor, so I hope he got the message, even if no one else did that day.

The Ugandan policy is to keep orphans within their own communities and not in orphanages, though in practice this means that children as young as six to twelve years old can be 'head of the household'. Global Care is a Coventry-based charity which has several projects for helping orphans in Uganda, as well as elsewhere in the world. I was able to visit two of these projects, one at Mbale, near the Kenyan border, and the other at Rukungiri, near the borders of Congo and Ruanda and also close to the scene of hundreds of cult deaths.

I've never before visited such poor homes. Many are basically mud huts, without electricity or water supplies and with leaking thatched roofs. Cooking is done over a charcoal burner, the staple diet being green bananas ('matoke') and rice. Clean water from boreholes has to be bought, then carried (sometimes for miles and by children) in two-gallon plastic containers.

For a large household this expense can be too



costly, so contaminated water is then used instead. There are no child allowances or widows' pensions, so survival depends on home-grown produce and any income on selling either some of that, or home-made charcoal or, sometimes, hand-woven basketry.

As 30% of the workforce has been wiped out by AIDS, there are frequently no able-bodied close relatives left, so grannies, who might have thought the time had come to put their feet up, instead have to dig and delve in the banana groves (again with the help of the children) to grow a few beans to add to the matoke. Malnutrition and infections are also endemic, especially for those who are HIV positive. I met elderly Erivida, whose eight children and their partners had each in turn died, leaving her in her small hut with six young grandchildren. Another, in her seventies, was caring for twelve.

The other major concern is education. Primary schools were only recently declared free for all, without first counting heads, so that schoolteachers are often swamped with classes of up to 500 children. Private education has accordingly taken off for wealthier families, but even then we saw classes of around 80. Senior school fees are about £750 a year, with uniforms, exercise books, pencils and paper to be found as well. We were shown the school reports of several very bright children, with pleas for contributions. Uganda has already lost a huge number of young parents and now risks the emergence of a poorly educated generation, made up of their surviving children.

The churches are equally packed, congregations of 1,000 being the norm, yet without enough

pastors and teachers, hence the risk of false cults creeping in. Many are converted but, with notable exceptions, not so many learn and practise discipleship. One of the exceptions was Stephen Asubu, Global Care's man in Uganda. I went with him to see a child in Mbale, living in one room with her destitute mother and four siblings. Farah's education and a meal a day come through Alice, a Staffordshire child, who can't change the world but is making a world of difference to Farah.

What about those grandmothers, who are themselves grieving, as well as burdened with unsought cares? This is where most inspiration and challenge came home to us. Erivida, like many others we met, is a Christian, and as she signed to us how hard she has to work and how hungry she gets, her face suddenly brightened as she looked up, hands raised, and said (we were told), 'Praise God. The Lord in heaven, he knows. God is great. God is good.'

This old lady was not the only one we heard expressing praise in the midst of pain. I was reminded of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where he speaks of 'troubles, hardships and distresses... hard work, sleepless nights and hunger... known, yet regarded as unknown; dying and yet we live on; sorrowful yet always rejoicing; poor yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything.' (2 Corinthians 6:4-10)

If I had so much taken away, would I, too, keep trusting and praising like that? And how about you?

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KEY POINTS

Under good leadership Uganda is doing better than most African countries in combatting the scourges of national debt and AIDS. But AIDS has still killed 30% of the workforce and the associated poverty, malnutrition and infection still produce an overwhelming burden, especially for orphaned children. Education is increasingly becoming the privilege of the rich only. Churches, although packed, lack pastors and teachers meaning that cults are creeping in and real discipleship is failing to keep pace with conversion rates. Despite this, the joyful faith seen in individuals in the face of pain and suffering is an incredible inspiration and challenge to us in the affluent, and indifferent, West.