

Out of Africa

Uganda Pilgrimage: The Schools

by Anne Pagel, Twinning Committee

One aspect of society that remains a priority throughout the world, regardless of culture, economies or government, is education. Traveling to Uganda this summer, I, along with a small group of SFB parishioners, had the opportunity to see the educational opportunities afforded those living in Uganda, Africa. In addition to visiting St. Paul's nursery school, we visited four sub-parish schools, a private school run by a member of the St. Paul's Women's Guild, and a secondary school. As an educator, I was particularly interested in the similarities and differences between education here and in Uganda.

I had hoped to find the same devotion and commitment to children and teaching that is prevalent in the profession; what I found was so much more. First and foremost, I met hard-working, caring teachers who walked incredibly long distances (sometimes more than five miles) to and from school. Every teacher I encountered dressed professionally in dresses or suits. I still marvel at how they could stay so clean where heat and red dust ensured that I looked disheveled and dirty only an hour after I began my day.

Secondly, I discovered teaching conditions that U.S. teachers would find impossible. At the Kasenge School the classrooms were unbelievably overcrowded with 150 students in the Primary 6 class (comparable to our 6th grade). St. Jude's School in the Namutambi sub-parish lacked fresh water; children often drank stagnant water, so typhoid was a persistent problem. Three of the schools lacked drums, something so integral to African culture; despite this, we were greeted with singing and dancing, as children kept the beat on plastic gerry cans (used for hauling water). The school buildings were mainly brick bungalows with concrete floors and corrugated iron roofs, often without electricity. Some classrooms had wooden school benches with attached writing surfaces; in others, children sat on the floor. Instructional materials were sparse, and teachers were usually limited to a chalkboard and chalk. We saw books, pencils, and paper in only a few classrooms. Overall, the conditions would overwhelm even the most resourceful teacher.

Finally, I encountered inquisitive, friendly children who walked to and from school (some in bare feet), eager to learn. Most memorable were their joyful faces at the sight of the relatively meager balls, jump ropes and school supplies we brought, and their surprised shouts and laughter at seeing their images on our digital cameras. Their faces will be forever ingrained in my mind.

So as I walk the gleaming, well-lit, polished halls of my own school, and when I enter my well-equipped, spacious classroom, I will always think of the teachers and children of Uganda. There, despite incredible hardships and challenges, the teachers continue to devote themselves to educating the country's youth and the children continue to learn.

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