

Bungoma Day, 10th September 2011

It was the day of the Historic Churches Ride and Stride, the Met Office had forecast storm force gales – but nothing could deter the fifty or so folk from across the diocese who gathered at Christ Church, Northampton for the annual Bungoma Day. The presence of both Bishop Donald and Bishop John, along with Archdeacon Christine, recently returned from her first visit to Bungoma, heightened the expectations of those wanting to “take it all a step further” – and we weren’t disappointed.

The morning started with worship, including joining in the words of the Lord’s Prayer in Swahili, and then Bishop Donald spoke to us on the passage from Ephesians which refers so evocatively to joining with “every family in heaven and on earth” to come to know “with all the saints, the length and depth and height and breadth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge.” During the ensuing hours we were to come to understand yet more of the familial bond that we share with our Kenyan brothers and sisters through membership of the family of Christ.

We were delighted and surprised to welcome Fidel, a young youth worker from Webuye in Bungoma Diocese who has just arrived in Northampton to spend one year working with Rev Andrew Symes in King’s Heath. His presence among served to emphasise the numerous gifts and talents we can receive from fellow Christians in Kenya – it was interesting in discussion over coffee to hear that his first impression in the four days since his arrival was “how little respect the young have for one another and their elders” in Britain.

Our keynote speaker for the morning was Archdeacon Christine, who spoke eloquently and movingly on her visit to Bungoma earlier this year. With the help of video clips and a slide show, she painted a vivid picture of life in our sister diocese, outlining her visits with Canon Clive Evans to churches, schools, clinics and projects. While all the parishes she visited share a similar “wish list” – for a permanent church building, a school and a clinic, she emphasised the importance of specialist advice in building projects; some structures have been started, only to be demolished because there was insufficient support for a roof. Some churches have access to advice; many do not. One of the most striking new churches visited by the Archdeacon was that of Mapela, where she met and shared conversation with her counterpart, Ven Helen Sikola, the Archdeacon and parish priest (there’s a lot of multi tasking in Bungoma!)

Not all churches have any building. The situation was exacerbated after the elections of a new Bishop last year when one of the unsuccessful candidates broke away and formed his own church, taking land that was not registered with him. There is now a campaign to encourage churches to register land that is given to them by benefactors to ensure that it remains in their possession for the future.

As Chair of the Diocesan Board of Education, Archdeacon Christine was particularly interested in the work of schools in Bungoma. Many primary schools have over 600 pupils in just eight classes, with a minimum of resources. One of the great success stories of school links between the Diocese of Peterborough and that of Bungoma is the link established between Kulwanda Academy and Greens Norton Primary School, where an exchange of letters and drawings highlighted both the similarities and the differences in school life for primary children. To highlight the many factors that our young people take for granted, the Archdeacon quoted a school where lessons in computer technology

formed part of the curriculum – this in a school with no electricity and no computers. When asked about this apparent overwhelming obstacle, the teacher replied that pupils needed to learn about computers if they were to make progress and get jobs in the wider world.

Archdeacon Christine spoke movingly and passionately about the role of women in Bungoma, emphasising that there are only about four women clergy. There is no theological problem about ordaining women but gender roles are clearly defined – the women in the kitchen while the men wait to be served.

In summing up, Archdeacon Christine reminded us that Bungoma is a very young diocese, and stressed her belief that the link is a “good thing” and there is much we can learn from our Kenyan counterparts, not least the importance they place on prayer. Every activity and every event is preceded by prayer; and there is a huge expectation among the people that God will do great things. In their eyes, their link with Peterborough diocese is one of those “great things.”

Our second speak of the day was Teleri Jardine, a Baptist with vast experience of the worldwide church who has just returned from two and a half years working on projects with subsistence farmers in Nigeria. She took as her topic three key areas that linked well with the experiences of Kenyans – agriculture, nutrition and conflict – and set them against the backdrop of the increasing anxiety over famine in the Horn of Africa.

Famine results from the failure of agriculture, from drought and environmental decline, the rise in food prices and declining levels of nutrition as well as a lack of alternative ways for farmers to earn a living, unfair trading conditions, poor government planning and war or conflict. Out of 120 children between the ages of 5 and 11 which Teleri and her team studied, 8% were severely malnourished and 16% moderately malnourished. Through links with the College of Nursing and various NGOs, she implemented training programmes, teaching up to 100 workers on ways to encourage good practice in nutrition and then sending them out to train others.

Farmers face numerous challenges: there is a lack of improved seed, pest control is poor, soil is depleted and there are no machines or fertiliser. In addition, farmers lack business skills which would enable them to improve their profit margins. In an attempt to redress the balance, the Community Volunteer Agricultural Extension Workers Scheme has been set up, in which farmers share experience and test new methods of planting and crop production. One scheme improved the production of maize by 50% through improved seed.

Teleri spoke with emotion about the violence that erupted following the elections in Nigeria, during which an entire market was destroyed, villages burned and hundreds made homeless. The community pulled together, local churches fed, sheltered and clothed those who had lost everything and with typical African resilience, people set about rebuilding their lives.

To conclude the day, Bishop Donald spoke on “Bungoma Futures.” He stressed how very important the relationship between the two dioceses is to the people of Bungoma, more important in some ways than to us. While there is a core of people dedicated to the link, there are many more whose priorities lie elsewhere – in equally worthwhile but different causes. For the people of Bungoma the link is a very important, offering as it does both a sense of relationship and the possibility of practical help. In January Bishop Donald, Canon Clive and six curates will be visiting Bungoma and we are all

asked to pray for that visit, for the friendships that will be forged and the lessons that will be learned.

Bishop Donald reminded us that in the past confirmation collections, together with any donations offered when the Bishop attended openings or other functions, went to Bungoma. He has decided to nominate a different charity each year to receive these donations – this year it is Farm Crisis Network, and on alternate years it will go towards supporting Christian work overseas. Next year, it will focus on Bungoma but in ways with measurable results and he emphasised the need for finding ways to meet financial need in an appropriate quantifiable way. This needs much dedicated prayer and we are all asked to hold both this whole issue, and those working to resolve it, in our prayers in the coming weeks and months.

The day concluded with a delicious Kenyan style lunch of chicken, rice, beans and ugali, topped off with fresh fruit and plenty of lively and thought provoking conversation.

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