

## 40 years on and breaking new ground: Ugandan Diary from the East Bristol Partnership

by Revd. Susan Allman

4<sup>th</sup> May 2009: Arrival of Revd. Romans Serunjogi, Mission Co-ordinator for Central Buganda Diocese to stay in the East Bristol Partnership for two weeks. How blessed we are! Today Romans is accompanied by Revd. Tabitha Ddembe, his friend and counterpart in West Buganda Diocese, who is in the UK for the first time and sensibly wearing a fleece jacket to keep warm.

My hope was to grow the link in East Bristol. Having been to Uganda twice, I am only too aware of the wonderful way in which we can be enriched by our Ugandan friends. I hoped and prayed that the next two weeks would demonstrate that for all of us.

Also, I wanted Romans to experience something very different from the bigger churches he normally visits. He is mission co-ordinator in Central Buganda Diocese; I felt sure he had insights to share with us.

Over the next two weeks Romans led assemblies in St. Matthias and Dr. Bell's School, Two Mile Hill Infant and Junior Schools and Air Balloon Hill Infants School. He was a real hit with the children, speaking about Uganda and the schools he runs as part of his mission. His magic tricks were a particular favourite, as he talked about diversity, but reminded the children, "We are all one."

We ate school dinners with the children. I watched with embarrassment as some of the children pushed their meals aside. I thought of the children in Romans' schools, who would be glad of anything to eat in the middle of the school day.

Most of the schools we visited are not church schools. Romans was scandalised that we had to be careful about how we spoke of our faith in a multi-cultural setting. When I explained the history of one of our older schools, he replied, "Do you mean to say the church started the school, the Board of Education took it over and now we can't talk about Jesus?"

Accompanying Romans in East Bristol was certainly an opportunity to view our own culture through a very different lens.

### Down on the Farm

One morning we visited a local dairy farm. Romans was wide-eyed with amazement when he heard of the staggering yield of milk the cows there gave every day. The farmer explained that their diet was supplemented with maize to keep them healthy and productive. I blushed as I thought of the two maize mills Romans has set up in Central Buganda Diocese to improve the nutrition of the local children.

I blushed again when the farmer showed us his state-of-the-art electric bore hole, which provides clean drinking water for the cows. I could not help thinking of the lakeside village of Lubajja some of us had visited in 2005, where there was no sanitation and no clean drinking water at all; the City Deanery churches have worked so hard to enable them to construct pit latrines, and a basic bore hole and pump so that the children can grow up in a healthy environment.

### The Parable of the Great Feast

Romans was a great encouragement to us in our local mission. We visited the Saturday drop-in lunch at St. Mary's, Fishponds; a fairly new venture. Volunteers were waiting inside, but as yet there were no diners. Romans and I went into the local park and told people on park benches and in the children's play area about the offer of a free lunch. Soon the tables inside were full.

"This place is in a great location for mission," Romans said encouragingly. "You are next to a park where you can do things outside and so close to the shops (on Fishponds Road)."

### The Coming of the Holy Spirit

The highlight of the two weeks was the day the Uganda Roadshow came to East Bristol, featuring the Anglican Youth Fellowship Band. The atmosphere as they led assemblies in Air Balloon Hill Junior School

was electric. The children responded enthusiastically to the dancing and singing; volunteers were able to joining in with both dancing and drumming at the front.

We moved on to Bristol Brunel Academy, the former Speedwell Secondary School, where the band would perform in the reception area during the students' three, overlapping, half-hour lunch breaks.

The Vice-Principal watched anxiously as they unloaded electronic instruments and amplifiers. She reminded us that it was exam time and that we would need to keep the volume at an appropriate level, as some students would be in class at all times.

The first group of students began to appear. The band began to sing. The lyrics were very openly Christian: "Hold on to Jesus; he is your best friend, he will not let you fall." There was a bit of jeering and my heart sank for the band. I could see that members of the band had noticed the jeers, but they were undaunted. Those of us who were with them prayed silently for a miracle, the band took their music to a new level and the miracle happened.

Suddenly there were students all around us and gathering on the walkways above, at levels two and three. They danced and cheered, joined in with the actions, took pictures with their mobile phones and mobbed the band for autographs afterwards. This happened three times, as each successive group of students took their lunch break.

In the final break, Revd. Tabitha Ddembe, who was with us for the day, started dancing for joy in the middle of the arena. One of the older boys approached her, tapped her on the shoulder and danced energetically with her during the last song.

The Vice-Principal's fears were laid aside; not a single member of staff complained. In fact many admitted to having a tear in their eye, the Principal told me afterwards. The Academy was pleased to be able to showcase the occasion to a visiting group of head-teachers who arrived part-way through. "They think we are wonderful now!" said the V-P.

Perhaps it was that we had given the young people, "The chance to show a different side of themselves," in the words of my youngest son. Perhaps, but I have no doubt that the Spirit moved among us on that unforgettable afternoon; and BBA rocked!

### Coming down from the Mountain-Top

Now Romans, Tabitha and the band have gone back to Uganda. They have to get on with their work and we have to get on with ours. We have shared some memorable times and made new friends.

I still have the niggling doubt that our Ugandan visitors realise quite how much they have given us from their side of the link, but those of us who met and shared with them are in no doubt. We have been blessed, enriched and encouraged, as well as perhaps being made a little more conscious of just how difficult it is for those of us who are materially wealthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

We have squandered the gift of life.  
The good life of some is built on the pain of many;  
The pleasure of the few on the agony of millions.  
To you we lift our outspread hands.  
We thirst for you in a thirsty land.  
We worship death in our quest to possess ever more things;  
We worship death in our hankering over our own security,  
As if our own survival, our own peace,  
As if life were divisible,  
As if love were divisible,  
As if Christ had not died for all of us.  
To you we lift our outspread hands. Amen.

*Prayer used at Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Vancouver 1983*