

COTTINGHAM CHRONICLES

GREETINGS FROM AN M.U. FAN

You might think these greetings come from a *Manchester United* fan but you would be mistaken!! They actually come from a *Mothers' Union* fan.

I have to admit that, as a single, working person, I never felt persuaded to show much interest in an organisation called *Mothers' Union* that met on a weekday afternoon!

However, since I have been in Burundi I have become a *big* fan. The work being done is terrific and making a real difference to the lives of not only women, but men, young people and children, families and whole communities. This is because it is at the sharp edge of practical, life-transforming, action.

As a Christian organisation, the Mothers' Union is primarily concerned to promote the well-being of families and communities worldwide and to challenge all forms of abuse, violence, and stigma wherever it is found.

A few months ago I travelled with Claudette, the Mothers' Union Provincial coordinator to visit one of its programmes - the Mothers' Union Literacy and Development Programme - in order to discover the impact the programme is having in the dioceses that make up the Province of the Anglican Church of Burundi. Since the beginning of the programme in the year 2000 just over 26,000 learners have been accredited as able to read and write. The majority are women! And all it takes to get an individual learner literate and numerate is about £25!

One of my lasting memories will be a volunteer facilitator who is a prisoner and working with a literacy circle in the prison among her fellow women prisoners, some of whom have babies and children with them. Those women who become literate are able to read and write letters for other prisoners. She shared how some hear of God's love and forgiveness for the first time. She also told of their need for practical signs of Christian love in the form of soap, clothes, and especially blankets because of the cold nights.

Not only are men and women becoming literate and able to handle numbers but they are forming associations and developing income-generating projects. At a place called Himbure there is an association made up of Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa – the three main ethnic groups - who manage agricultural projects and who are learning to be reconciled across ethnic divides. One facilitator said that before the programme the different groups couldn't sit together but now they can sit and eat from the same plate.



Harvesting beans at Himbure

The programme is a catalyst for family and community transformation. One man spoke of how he was helping his wife by doing the washing, collecting fire wood, and helping to cultivate the land. A woman told how she inherited land from her father when he decided to divide it equally between his 3 sons and 2 daughters.

At this time of year we remember how Jesus came to be at the sharp edge of all our lives to bring transformation, healing, and hope that things really can be different.

At the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus said that he was fulfilling these words from the prophecy of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4 v 1-19 NIV)

So, as we move towards the end of 2008 and the start of the New Year it is my prayer that we may be channels of that same transforming love and hope to our families, neighbours, and communities.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS and NEW YEAR