

Uganda Orphan Support

Meeting the Need

Many members of Grace who have joined us in the last several years are not familiar with the origins of our support for the Ugandan AIDS orphans. We face a particular need for their support for the next school term, so now is a good time to remind all of us of our history together.

Mark and Sharon Dembro met Fr. James Ssemakula, a priest at the Anglican church in Stockholm, when Mark was assigned to the U.S. Embassy in the mid-90s. Father James had come to Sweden with his family as a political refugee from Uganda in the early 70s. When Mark and Sharon met him, the family was well established – his wife worked as a nurse and his children were at University. Father James described to them the situation of HIV/AIDS orphans in rural Uganda and what the local Anglican Church was doing to help. In 1995, Mark and Sharon began contributing to that effort. A year or so later, James said he felt called to return to Uganda to help the children. Leaving his family behind, he went to Kasaka and began efforts to help the children and also to empower women. The program he developed included:

- supporting orphans by paying school fees and helping their guardian families;
- organizing co-ops of women to raise chickens and pigs;
- building a sewing shop and equipping it with machines and hiring an instructor to teach the women basic tailoring and sewing skills so that they could compete for contracts sewing school uniforms;
- counseling and finding work for young women who wanted to leave lives of prostitution;
- organizing some of the orphans into singing, dancing, music groups (he was a very good musician) and encouraging performances in surrounding villages with their AIDS prevention songs and dramas.

He dreamed of building a dormitory for the children so that many of them could leave abusive situations and of digging a well so women would not have to walk long distances to get clean water.

In May 2005, Mark and Sharon arranged a trip for James to Port Townsend. He was a great hit! He spoke at churches from here to Tacoma and to Rotary and other civic groups. Everywhere he spoke people were enthusiastic to support his mission. He left with high hopes of being able to build the dormitory and do a number of other things that people here had said they wanted to help with.

In August of 2005, we received an email from James' wife, telling us he had died suddenly while visiting Sweden. We were shocked and grieved. He was a one-person operation and we knew how difficult it would be to find a replacement – a person we could trust with money for the children. Their school fees were paid through the end of 2005, but we had no way of continuing as 2006 began. Through the efforts of Bill and Gwen Howard, we got in touch in May 2006 with John Veldhuis, an American who is Vice Chancellor of Central Buganda University. He recommended a young man studying there as an excellent choice to see that money got to the orphan's schools.

Kenneth Kasule has far exceeded our expectations. He:

- knows each child, their scholastic and other needs and aspirations;
- visits their schools regularly and speaks with their teachers;
- knows the home situation of each child;
- takes care of their medical needs;
- counsels them;
- holds a group meeting following each term to discuss school and other issues of importance to them and their guardians;
- has provided a shilling-by-shilling account of all funds expended for each child;
- travels to Kampala (a six-hour bus journey over terrible roads) to send emails to us and take care of banking business.

Grace Lutheran Church began sponsoring children in 2003 through disbursements from the Endowment Fund with additional individual contributions. The Dembros have made up the remainder. Our outlay from the Endowment Fund has been about \$4000, disbursed in time for the winter term beginning in late January. This year, the latest report on the fund shows a loss in principle. The bill for the winter term will be about \$5,000. We may not be able to count on the Endowment Fund to meet most of the need. The Social Concerns Committee met and decided that continued support of these children through this difficult time should be our priority. We would like to make this a joint project with St. Paul's.

As Christmas approaches, we hope members of both congregations will consider giving to the orphans in lieu of giving gifts, where that makes sense. Audrey Cherney – our artist in residence – is producing beautiful Christmas gift cards, each featuring a picture of one of our children. She is also producing Christmas greeting cards. Both will be available soon.

There is no better value for our money – the administrative fees to help our 31 children amount to about \$40 per month to Kenneth plus his bus fare and phone expenses. Our inability to meet the need would mean children leaving school, vulnerable to prostitution, a life of destitution and a probable early death. Reading their letters, it is clear that they see Grace Lutheran Church as God's instrument of blessing for them. We are in their prayers. Let us remember to keep them in ours.

Kenneth writes: "I am glad once again to share my greetings with you in our Lord's name. Hope everyone is doing well and your life is good. Please never get tired of us when I say thanks a lot for all that you are doing for the children's program! It is only that word of appreciation I have to throw to you as a return for your big help. You made me useful to my community and I constantly ask my Lord to grant me the wisdom and strength to carry forward my services. Thank you very much for your constant prayers to me and the encouragement.

Yes, I belong to the family of Mr. Livingstone and Annet Kasule with no biological child yet – and not planning to have one in the next five years – but I have a second family that seems to have taken much of myself. It sleeps on my mind and I am glad that God is using me to reach services to his beloved children."