

Support for Ugandan girls

Professor Jean Johnson

In 2015 I described, in this Newsletter, how my work in Uganda started just over 13 years ago, referring to strategies I use to improve standards in the teaching of chemistry and to make it more fun. This is still a major aim of what I do and the presence of the Almighty can be seen: just a few weeks ago, I was once more at Bukinda Seminary, 30km north of Kabale, when Mariam, the scout who checks up on administration of 'A' level examinations, arrived. The Lodge she had booked turned out to be unsuitable and so she stayed at the seminary. We chatted over meals, and then she told me she would introduce me to her school chemistry teacher, Joyce – who turned out to be the subject officer for chemistry and physics at the school examinations Board (UNEB). Joyce and I have met twice and we have plans: my teams use small scale, cheap methods to illustrate the 'O' level chemistry syllabus, rather than the much larger scale experiments that were used in England over 50 years ago but are rarely done nowadays by teachers. Frankly, in the typical Ugandan school situation, with large classes and high temperatures, they are not safe anyway. As well as this, we have made other contacts and it really looks as though during 2018 we may be able to influence schools over a much wider area. Pray that it may be so.

Having worked in several girls' schools in England I am only too well aware of the incidence of schoolgirl pregnancy. From my early visits to Uganda I asked whether this was a problem in the country. The usual answer was that there was no problem and abortion is illegal. One day I was being driven to a rural girls' school and saw several women walking, or more truthfully swaying along, with no shoes on and babies on their backs. The driver did not speak English but I managed to work out that these ladies were drunk with the local brew, and had been thrown out of their homes when it was discovered that they were pregnant! I then began to ask more persistent questions and gradually discovered the truth: boarding schools do pregnancy tests at the beginning and end of every term and in many cases girls are sent away from school at once if the test is positive. Their parents often reject them too. Thus, many of them are desperate. If they are lucky, the church where they live may know of a place where they can stay, but such provision seems to be very rare. One girl who was taught chemistry by one of my colleagues was conceived when her mother was in top primary and abandoned at birth. She was lucky: a relative cared for her and helped with school fees and she is now a graduate scientist. The next stage when pregnancy is common is in the period between 'O' and 'A' level. I have come across several clever girls who have had to drop out of S5 (first year 'A' level courses) because of pregnancy. One girl was sent herbs by the mother of the young man concerned, and arrived at the local clinic bleeding profusely. She lost the baby and her own life was in danger. That was not the end: I met her several times afterwards and it was obvious she was depressed, but the priest in whom she had confided did not seem interested

in exploring possible help for her. I went to a graduation, then to the chaplaincy Sunday service next day, when we prayed for a young lady. Next day she was dead. Friends at another University also had a sad story of one of their students who died after an abortion, which can be obtained quite easily at numerous clinics that have sprung up in the country in recent years. I am told that the basic price they pay does not include the drug that would stop bleeding. Sadly, I have also heard of a few clever girls, from poor areas, who went to University with government scholarships and became pregnant during the course. Some of these girls knew well that their baby was a human being and would not destroy its life, even when their parents disowned them. I wondered how they got in to this mess. Scholarships cover fees but there are many other essential expenses and so a poor girl who has no money can accept financial help from a boy, then finds it comes with certain expectations. All very sad.

Some years back, I was able to get funding from a pro-life organisation in England to hold a weekend conference at Namugongo. Attendees included young people, teachers and church workers, from Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal churches. The aim was to form a national organisation; it has not yet made much progress due to lack of funding. However, one ecumenical group that stood out came from Fort Portal. Rwenzori Pro-Life and Child Care Foundation have an office near Mountains of the Moon University which offers a wide range of support and counselling, both for girls and for married couples and is open six days a week. As a result of support from UK friends over the last two years they have run radio programmes, with phone-in sessions, during the long holiday from early December when girls are most at risk. They provide basic help for pregnant girls and young mothers and now, through help from TWAM in Ipswich, a Baptist-founded charity, we have been able to send sewing and knitting machines so these girls and young mothers can learn skills through which they can earn a living.



Young mothers learning sewing skills

Even more ambitiously, they have built a pro-life house, which should be operative early in 2018. Girls will be able to live there during pregnancy and for the first few months afterwards. This is an experimental project but we are excited by it and hope the model can be replicated elsewhere. Much information has been gained from their experiences and they can be contacted through their website: www.rwenzoriprolifechildcare.org



New pro-life house

I have now visited Karamoja five times, using the excellent Mission Aviation Fellowship flights. We have started a Chemistry Centre there, which should be able to expand as the rapid road building continues. I have visited Kangole Girls' School, the only girls' school in that area, several times. Like other girls' schools, they have students who leave because of pregnancy but at the moment that is not their biggest concern. On the one hand, they are hoping to start 'A' level sciences in February 2018: my own experience has shown that even girls with very poor grades in 'A' level biology and chemistry can do a certificate, and with maybe D grades can get a scholarship to do a diploma: in two or three years they can have well paid work in a medical laboratory or pharmacy or in midwifery. But this development is threatened by an even bigger problem: secondary schools in Karamoja have for years received food from the World Food Programme. In recent years the amount given has decreased but in October 2017 schools were told that there were so many other calls for their help that they would be unlikely to be able to continue to help schools. In fact, they did give some food last term but the fear is that none will be given next term. If that happens, schools like Kangole could not continue. We presume that the large number of South Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda and the situation in the DRC must be part of the problem.

Education helps a girl to escape from poverty. Ugandan girls face great temptations and need help so they can make wise decisions about their future. We need to monitor the Karamoja situation and seek alternative sources of help if the food situation

deteriorates. It would be tragic if youngsters given a primary education through the school building funded by projects like that of Irish Aid were not able to continue to secondary education.

Professor Jean Johnson is a retired chemistry teacher and educationalist