

View from Maseno

By Dr. Cynthia Caples

September 16, 2010

Most of you have heard about the Mothers' Union activities, especially their orphan feeding program, in the Maseno area. Yesterday I had the honor and pleasure of seeing a special program to honor several hundred Mothers' Union members who volunteer their time and labor to bring help and support to the orphans in this program. Many of these women are only barely less poor than the orphans themselves. All struggle to keep their families adequately fed. Many have little or no schooling. Some are HIV-positive or have other serious health conditions. But they work in their local orphan-feeding program one day a week, hauling water and food sacks, standing over hot smoky cookfires for hours making mixtures of maize and beans not only filling but palatable (I've eaten the results), and giving the orphans one day a week in which they are looked after by mothers, taught songs and prayers, given a supervised place to play, and cared for and comforted. You can always tell which children have most recently joined the orphan program; they're the ones with the glassy look of malnutrition, the generally uncared-for appearance, the sadness, and often the lameness that comes from feet infested with sandflies, for which the orphan feeding program will put them in footbaths that eventually eradicate the problem (subject to reinfestation). The ones who have been coming to the programs for some time are visibly healthier, more alert, and, in a well-behaved way, more like the children you know at home: ready, in a shy kind of a way, to have fun.

The program yesterday, unlike the other programs, was mainly for the women themselves, to honor the volunteers who have done so much.

Around 350 volunteers attended. The program was held at a local Anglican church compound. The Anglican Bishop of Maseno North presided; Bishop Oketch has an imposing presence, great familiarity with ceremonial situations, and best of all he is a strong supporter of the Mothers' Union orphan program. The Maseno Orphan Feeding Program has attracted attention and respect in other parts of Kenya, so he gets some reflected glory from it, a clear case of positive feedback. American Episcopalian missionary Dr. Nan Hardison, the Principal of St. Philip's Anglican Seminary (where I teach), gave the history of the orphan-feeding program. Eight years ago, in discussions with Mrs. Oketch and with women in the local churches, she realized that there were more orphans and otherwise uncared-for children in the vicinity than anyone had calculated. She asked women from four local parishes to count up such children in their parish, and the results ran from 300 to 700 children per parish - children whose parents had died of AIDS or other illnesses, children who had been left behind when one parent died and the other went away to the city to look for work and a new partner, etc. etc. All the women were shocked at the magnitude of the need in their midst. Dr. Hardison asked them to think about what the children needed most, and what the Mothers' Union could do for them. The women thought it over and decided nourishment was the most immediate and acute need. They planned and calculated and thought they could manage one good feeding a month for these children, so that is what they originally organized and began running. Then Dr. Hardison contacted friends in the Diocese of Massachusetts' Jubilee Program, who provided funding for supplemental food

supplies so that the children could have one day of care and feeding every week, and the program shifted from a once-a-month to once-a-week care-and-feeding day. Other Anglican parishes in the area gradually took up the idea and agreed to make the commitment to work and care that it takes; now there are 31 such programs in the district. Churches, schools, and one or two better-off individuals have donated the use of their grounds for the program (if they have a cookshed, that's wonderful - if not, rain is fortunately not usually at midday). In a couple of cases, a farming field has been loaned as a farm-school for some of the children, to learn basic farming techniques; they can take home whatever they raise, which gives them an important addition to the little they have.

Increasingly, there are some male volunteers supplementing the females; one of them is a graduate of the orphan program himself, who got a scholarship to high school (not free in Kenya), completed it successfully, now works in the St. Philip's Seminary grounds, and volunteers his spare time to help other children orphaned as he was.

Anyway, back to the ceremony. The groups of women from the different parishes sang or gave dramatic performances; one group did their own dramatization of how Dr. Hardison had presented the original program proposal to Bishop Oketch. The largest woman in the group gave a spot-on performance as the bishop (a big, robust man), both humorous and charming, and his party acknowledged with chuckles that the portrait was right on target. Bishop Oketch had another appointment that afternoon, but he called ahead to say he would be delayed, so that he could present a certificate of appreciation individually to each one of the volunteers, a mark of honor much appreciated by all of them, especially as many of the women had little or no schooling and this was the first certificate of any kind they had ever been awarded.

The ceremony was followed by a luncheon of rice and beef and the excellent local tomatoes, a big event for women for whom meat is a very rare luxury and a meal prepared for them by someone else an almost unknown privilege. Friends of Dr. Hardison's in the U.S. had designed and had printed up badges with "Mother's Union Orphan Program" and "You go, girl!" (the program's unofficial motto - for the rarer male volunteers, there were also some "You go, guy!" badges) for the volunteers, which were greatly appreciated. Everyone had a wonderful time. Everyone felt pleased and honored, from the bishop down to the lowliest visitor (me), and it was one of the very few occasions I have ever attended in my life from which everyone took away the right messages.

This morning Dr. Hardison and I and the newly-arrived Youth Corps missionary went to the weekly orphan-feeding volunteers' meeting in the nearby market town of Luanda, chaired by the wonderful woman who had organized yesterday's regional program. We all greeted each other enthusiastically and reminisced happily about yesterday's great event.

The women sighed with pleasure: there had been enough food to go round, rare in a subsistence economy. Indeed, more than enough; one woman said shyly she had actually gone back for a second helping of meat. Several said that they had not needed any evening meal, they were so well fed at the luncheon. Several women also mentioned the certificates, which clearly meant a great deal to them. Everyone agreed this had been a wonderful occasion. All agreed they hoped it would not be the last of its kind. Second the motion.

