

Wednesday - 3 January 2008

We all met at the church at 9 am where Nathan, Eric, Jackie, Edna and Stephanie and myself were about 10 people congregational members had assembled to sing, "May the feet of God go with you" and give us God's blessing for our mission trip to Lira.

Jim drove us to the airport where we met up with Louise and Rod and also met a group of young missionaries from the Salvation Army in Nambour who were heading off to Rwanda for 3 weeks. After finding out that our flight was delayed for around 2 hours, we had lunch with the \$15 meal vouchers from Cathay Pacific. This meant that we will be late for our connecting flight, but to their credit, they had organised our tickets and boarding passes to fly Cathay Pacific to Johannesburg and a connecting flight on South African airways to Entebbe. Our friends from the Salvation Army however had been routed to Frankfurt airport to connect with a flight to Rwanda staying the night in Frankfurt. God always has a plan regardless of what we might arrange.

Thursday – Friday 4 & 5 January 2004

The jumbo jet flight left Hong Kong at 11:30pm arriving in Johannesburg at 6:30am local time, a long bumpy, uncomfortable flight as the seats were hard and don't recline, just the seat padding (if you call it that) moves to extend support under your legs. At least they fed us well, plenty of entertainment on your personal screens. As we flew into Johannesburg we were met with wind, rain, lightning, thunder and thick fog.

On our arrival we were soon ushered to the transit lounge to wait for the 2:00pm flight to Entebbe. We found comfortable chairs in danesi café, relaxing and drinking coffee and trying to overcome the rocking and rolling effects of the flights.

A walk around the shops turned up many different types of South African artefacts. The colours of the pottery cups, saucers and plates were of particular interest, as well as the place mats, all extremely expensive, the only thing that wasn't expensive was the alcohol.

To board our flight to Kampala with South African Airways from gate A22 we had to go via a bus onto the tarmac and walk up the stairs. We had a meal on board and watched the countryside and the huge Lake Victoria that disappeared into the distance before landing at Kampala. The Visa costs \$50US with no photo required, the cricket bats went missing from our luggage, and Louise could see that her bag had been opened, thankfully nothing was missing.

Ready to meet us at the airport were Robert and Noah and a van to take us to the Olympia Hotel. Pastor led us in devotion and prayer circle before going to our rooms for a shower and sleep in a bed after 48 hours of travel.

Saturday - 5 January 2004

Sunrise is around 6:45am, a magnificent sight with the bright orange glow (due to the smoke from the continually burning fires) so we went for a walk outside the hotel along the dirt track. About 50m up the track was a broken water pipe, and children were collecting water to take back to their homes. After breakfast we drove into Kampala where Robert negotiated the currency exchange before we went to the Lutheran Media Ministry Uganda (LMMU) to meet the Pastor and his team to learn about their work through out Uganda. At present there are around 21,000 people taking bible study via correspondence. Their media ministry is extensive covering publications on issues such as religion, aids, marriage, divorce, death and the purpose for living. They use their small recording studio to make CDs for distribution to many parts of Uganda.

Back to the hotel to pay the bill before rushing to the bus depot for the 11am bus to Lira. We didn't need to panic as the bus finally left around 1pm and due to the fuel shortage in Uganda, the bus driver had to go to 3 petrol garages to negotiate for fuel. Armed guards were at nearly every petrol station due to the petrol crisis. Eventually we were on our way for the bus journey of a life time as the condition of the roads, road construction, trucks, buses, motor bikes, push bikes, people walking along the side of the road, cattle, the odd police checkpoint and deep pot holes made for fast or slow driving depending on the circumstance. They use their bus horns to warn people to get out of the

way, and they either pull off to the side of the road, or the bus will swerve to get around. There were times when I thought the bus would roll, but it didn't, guess he knew what he was doing.

At time the bus would stop at street stalls and sellers would come rushing along side of the bus with bottle of water or food for the passengers to purchase.

As we drove over the Nile River I thought the bus driver would slow down for people to take photographs, nope, flat out across the bridge finally reaching Lira around 7pm, 2 hours late. We were met at the bus stop by Robert and James and loaded into the van from the Farm View Resort and a truck for the 5km journey where we ate our pre-ordered dinner. Sitting out in the cool night air under the stars and listening to the sounds of Africa was magnificent. The evening finished with devotion and prayer circle to thank God that he has brought us safely to Lira and a room where we could unpack our clothes knowing that we wouldn't have to pack again in the morning. Mosquito nets are over the bed to stop us from being bitten, a ceiling fan to keep us cool.

Sunday 6 January 2009

Up at 6:30am for breakfast and 9am church service at St Luke's Lira. Due some mechanical problems we reached the church late but what a welcome we received from the congregation members as they sang and danced, very warm and emotional for most of us. The order of worship was from the black hymnbook, very traditional but so moving. Pastor Nathan delivered the sermon that was translated as he went along. During the speeches, Rod presented a banner from Good Shepherd Witta to St. Luke's Lira and each of the mission team introduced ourselves and spoke briefly about ourselves and our purpose. We sang a song from the congregation, but didn't do as well at the singing groups from Lira.

After church we were loaded onto the back of the truck to visit Roberts shop and meet his family, then to a restaurant for some lunch. The walk around the markets in Lira was interesting, especially the butcher shops and dried fish stalls and the range of fruit and vegetables for sale. Most of the other items for sale in the markets are the same as what we can purchase back home, nothing African on display. We stopped off at a general store to purchase more bottled water, soda and ice cream, off to the petrol station for fuel (200,000 shillings buys 60 litres) before heading back to the resort, the people are so friendly.

Later in the afternoon as we went for a walk we were mobbed with children and young adults heading off to the water hole to fill their containers. As we got closer to a small number of huts we were met by a male, and after he started to laugh and join in the conversation, the rest of the people came out and joined in. We asked if we could join them as they walked down the track to the water hole and had a great time learning some more words, learning about their culture and schooling.

Along the road we met the armed security guard who protects the resort compound all night.

At the water hole they scooped up the grey coloured water that had around 8 frogs swimming and was told they don't boil the water before drinking.

Nathan was able to contact Dr. Robi and found out that he won't arrive in Lira to start the empower trauma rehabilitation program until Tuesday, so we will head off into Lira tomorrow to visit some of the people who have received micro loans to see how the money is being used. Dinner tonight was again filling and enjoyable.

Monday 7 January 2008

This morning Noah and Robert left to go back to Kampala, but we will be seeing them again before we leave. We set off into Lira and began visiting the people who have started up businesses using micro-credit loans through St. Luke's Lira. Some of the businesses include convenience shops, health supplies, welding and repairs, two piggery project, making mud bricks and farming. As we drove around Lira we passed through parts of the city that were worse off than other parts, if that's possible. After visiting the bicycle shop we visited one of the few IDP camps right in the city itself. At one stage there were over 350,000 displaced persons, but now thank God and a year of peace most have returned to their homes leaving around 200 people in 2 camps. After 21 years of war, many of the people have never seen their homes and only know the IDP camps. We visited Ngetta

station where Joseph and family live and were invited into the home of his aunty, a magnificent experience and an insight in how people live. Off to one side was the cook house shared by 8 families. At this village were shown how they make the 5000 mud bricks, dry them out and stack them before firing for around 6 hours. He could employ 10 workers if he had the money to pay wages while the business expanded. There is a huge demand for bricks in Lira and plenty of clay, so there is an opportunity for more to be started up to sell bricks for an income. At least they don't have to worry about transport, that is the responsibility of the purchaser.

We stopped off at the Samaritans Purse compound where the Empower program will be run tomorrow and heard about the work handling food relief to the people in the IDPs in and around Lira. Their work will finish in around 2 years.

We travelled out to visit Pastor Joseph at Akia Station and while there it started to rain lightly however by the time we got back into Lira itself it had stopped but we could see that it had rained much heavier in Lira. As we drove out in the opposite direction to the farm stay lodge there was less water on the roads and in the gutters. Talking to some of the staff they said that they had more wind than rain.

Tuesday 8 January 2008

Robert drove us to the Samaritans Purse compound for an all day training session with Dr. Robi and people from the Samaritans Purse. It was good to have the refresher course in what we had done at St. Luke's Nambour, and now that we are one day away from offering the Empower program tomorrow, it now feels very real, especially having been in Lira for several days, meet some of the people, and visited a number of camps.

The training sessions started around 9am with about 40 people under an open tent out in the yard with Dr. Robi and apart from the electricity going off and not coming back on for the rest of the day, everyone was totally engrossed in the presentations, activities and interactions. Four groups were established early in the program to put into practice what we had learned. Apart from the brakes for morning tea and lunch, the sessions went until 5pm.

It was interesting to hear about the dowry system for a young man to pay the father before he can take his daughters hand in marriage. Some fathers make a business out of marriage so the price is high, possibly 2 cows, a bag of rice and a container of cooking oil; others are more lenient so it may be a cow or a goat. The price of a daughter goes higher as she becomes more educated, however it seems the men we spoke with take this tradition very seriously and work and save for years so they can have enough possessions to get married.

I was introduced to a young man (Abby) who told me that when he was a young boy his father died and so he spent 8 years living on the streets until he met Dr. Robi who assisted him to return to school to finish his education, now he is studying for a degree in Information Technology at the University in Kampala. Although he has only completed 1 semester, he has already set up a small computer shop, sings and records gospel songs, and has entered the Empower program to take it the street kids of Kampala. He requested my email address so that I can assist him with his studies as his lecturers don't have enough consultation time to meet with students to answer their questions. Abby was one point off getting a bursary from the University which would have meant that all his fees would have been subsidised. Another young man (Joseph) is studying for a Diploma in Project Management on weekends while working all week. Only able to study 2 units (courses) per semester, he will not finish until 2010, but is very excited about his future prospects. While there are many projects ready to be implemented around Lira, no one is yet willing to spend their money until they are absolutely convinced their region is safe from the LRA.

The concentration during these intense sessions made everyone tired, so once we had finished dinner, everyone went to their rooms to prepare for the first two sessions tomorrow. What an exciting time this will be. We praise the Lord ever day for the blessings that he provides for his people in Lira and for us as we are encouraged by what we heard and learn from such a vibrant and happy community.

Wednesday 9 January 2008

The day has finally arrived when we put all our training into practice and as we set out in the back of Roberts truck there was a real feeling of excitement amongst the team. We were divided into the following groups:

St Luke's Lira; Nathan and Tony with SP [Simon Peter] as the interpreter

Ngetta Station; Jackie and Stephanie with Patrick as the interpreter

Akia Station has two groups; Louise and Edna with Susan as the interpreter; and Eric and Rod with James as the interpreter

While the teams for Ngetta and Akia were driven to their locations by truck, at the end of the sessions (1 and 2) they had to catch a boda-boda (bicycle) back into Lira, although there was a mix up in the price for the border-border from Akia to Lira so Eric, Rod, Louise, Edna, Susan and James walked back to St. Luke's, a distance of around 7Km. They were all hot and exhausted.

As Nathan and Tony were already in Lira, we went to an Internet Café to send off a news update to Lynne at St. Luke's Nambour so she could put it in the Bulletin for this Sunday. The dial-up Internet connection so took about 20 minutes to login in to my email account at Bigpond in Australia and attach a word document file, a little slow by Australian standards, but we were able to bring our congregational members back in Nambour and Witta up to date on what has been happening since we left Brisbane International airport.

Nathan and I caught a border-border back to the church and waited for the rest of the teams to arrive from the out stations. Once assembled, we told our stories of the affect sessions 1 and 2 had on the participants. Some really amazing events took place while establishing trust through the introductions, games and sharing of goals and identifying the obstacles that need to be overcome for their dreams to come true. After a short prayer to give thanks for the first day and ask for God's blessing and guidance for day 2, we headed into town with James to select cloth to make shirts and dresses. Such a variety of patterns and colours made it hard to choose, but we all chose a cloth and design before heading off to the Mango Tree Café for a cold drink and for James to take measurements so that he can cut and stitch our garments over the coming days.

On our way back to the resort we met up with hundreds of people walking along the road making their way to the Anglican convention. One large group even had a band playing as they marched along with their possessions and food supplies for the three days. We met an Anglican minister at our resort who extended an invitation for us all to call into the convention, this we would like to do as he told us there could be up to 20,000 people attending.

Had a good discussion with a man called Alfred, a plumbing teacher at the local technical college who told us of his 90 students and the type of plumbing work most commonly carried out in Lira. We discussed projects such as installing solar electricity panels to drive pumps to draw water from the water holes, the installation of water tanks to distribute water at strategic locations around a camp, attaching gutters, downpipes and water tanks to those huts that have tin roofs. As Alfred said, if we do this in one village, the others will see the benefits and want them installed as well. Through education, their traditional customs of walking to the water hole and carrying water will change and make life easier and provide a higher quality of water to the village.

That evening as we sat out under the trees relaxing and preparing for the next day, we could hear the singing in the distance, so beautiful that I am sure all Africans were born with singing voices. Around 7pm Dr. Robi, Shasha, Reale, Nelson and Abby arrived to have dinner with us and although the power had gone off, we sat under the stars (fending off the mosquitos) and sharing stories. The power finally came back on later in the evening, but this is a common occurrence in Lira.

Thursday 10 January 2008

All of the clients returned to day two of the Trauma program and some groups had some wanting to attend the program. Our group had a visit from a Lutheran Dr. Sampson (medical) from Tanzania who is visiting Lira and saw the St. Luke's and walked down the track to introduce himself. He has suffered greatly at the hands of rebels and has a bullet graze in the back of the head as the bullet

aimed to kill him just missed. Unfortunately the woman who was on the operating table was shot and killed in the same raid.

The next session is about acknowledging that trauma and stress can happen to everyone, real and imaginary, and it is up to us to recognise the symptoms and take the necessary steps to control our actions and reactions. Identifying the symptoms for some in the group was an emotional experience as they recalled (relived) some of the atrocities they had witnessed by the LRA. When the session became too stressful and you could see their spirits going down, we introduced a game to cheer them up again before reading the story about the effects of a snake bite and what can happen if we don't take the right steps to stop the poison from spreading while seeking medical attention.

We finished the session with a game which once again raised their spirits, always important to finish with something happy for them to remember. Afterwards we finished with praise songs and prayer.

As the group dispersed Nathan and Tony walked to Samaritans Purse to meet up with Susan and make a financial contribution to print 300 Empower program booklets in the Luo language. As we arrived back at the track leading down to the church we were met by the groups from Akia who this time got a lift back in the truck. The group from Ngetta met up with us at the Mango Café for a refreshing drink and rest. As Nathan wanted to get back early, he took a boda-boda (motorbike) back to the resort while the rest of the team walked the stalls of the market and shop looking for artefacts made in Uganda. We found many items, but unfortunately most are imported from China (sound familiar). Around 3pm everyone was tired and caked in red dust so we all headed back to the resort to rest and prepare for tomorrow. Louise had brought along a frisbee and went outside the compound to play with the children.

Friday 11 January 2008

On our way into Lira we bought a whole tray of bananas for 18,000 shillings from a lady seller walking the main road as we had discovered that for some, a banana is a luxury even at around 500 shillings each. Today was the continuation of the session where clients tell their stories of stress and trauma but are given the first set of tools to control their emotions and feelings such as breathing exercises, a tongue twister such red leather/yellow leather, or lebbi bedo moto (meaning getting stuck saying something in Luo) and arm wrestling. These activities were not only fun, but they also realised that could not be sad and happy at the same time. When the bananas were shared with the clients in every group, they were very appreciative and soon all bananas were eaten. In the future will take bananas, nuts or bread to every session.

When everyone met back at the church, Nathan and Tony went with Rev. Nelson and Pastor Robert to visit an orphanage but on the way we met a business man who mills grain seed for oil. He was extremely informative on the way the projects should be started in and around Lira, the levels of government, and most importantly, how the people must initiate the projects and take ownership. As we walked into the orphanage we were met by the ladies and children dancing and singing and shown the way into their small, but well constructed church building. The orphanage is for women with aids and the children. Some children also have aids with most of the 50 or so children having lost their mother through aids. Pastor Robert introduced Nathan and Tony to the adults and children before they were each asked to give greetings and shared something about our lives before Rev Nelson lead the singing and concluded with prayer. A very moving experience and so refreshing to see this project run by the small congregation, we hope to take the whole team to the orphanage before we leave Lira.

As we walked back into the Mango Tree where the rest of the team were waiting, we went to the Renaissance Institute of Management (meaning rebirth of knowledge) where Pastor Robert is the Director. The Institute was established in 1999 as a non-profit, community based organisation offering certificate and diploma courses in administration, management, government, project planning, accounting, journalism, purchasing and supply, stores and stock control, librarianship, secretarial studies, hotel and tourism, tours and travel and catering. Most trainees are victims of HIV/AIDS, armed conflicts with the LRA, and the Karamonjong warriors (cattle rustlers).

Currently they have a group of 60 students graduating in February. The admission fee for all courses is 5000 shillings.

All week the local radio stations have been broadcasting messages about the wosoongo (plural for white people, masoongo single white person) driving around on the back of a truck wondering who they are and what they are doing in Lira. Rev Nelson asked Nathan if we would like to go on air during the religion hour either in the morning or the afternoon to tell them our stories, why we are in Lira, and about the gospel. Everyone in the team is eager to participate, so if Rev. Nelson can organise a date and time we will all be there. What a great way to spread Gods word and tell them about the Empower program. God puts opportunity after opportunity in our way every day and we rejoice in this and are so grateful for his continued blessings.

When we got back to the Mango Tree Café for a cold drink, everyone was feeling the heat and so we all hopped up on the truck to make our way back to the Farm View resort to rest. After dinner and devotion we all soon disappeared to our rooms for sleep.

Saturday 12 January 2008

As the clients learned how to recognise the symptoms of stress and trauma, they also started to learn ways to recognise the difference between imagination and reality and devise questions to find out the truth before reacting. You get the feeling that they can now see hope as they share their stories and learn the empowerment skills to take control of their own lives.

After the session this morning, a church council meeting was called with representatives from the congregations of Lira, Kakogy and Akia to discuss ways in which they can be more proactive to solve their problems and for the mission team to hear and learn the many challenges they face. Through Rod, Good Shepherd Witta will offer a hand of fellowship and work with this congregation. Nathan spoke of the power of reconciliation and prayed that the divisions between the members and the members be a thing of the past, and with Gods help, the Lutheran Church will grow and enable them to take a greater responsibility in church affairs. Tony spoke about the opportunities to explore AUSAID initiatives in the areas of health, education and communications, but that the projects must be community based with ownership from within the communities if their applications were to succeed. This will be a long term project requiring community cooperation not just Lutheran, each of the 5 levels of Government in Uganda for the Australian Government to consider their project proposals.

When we got back to Farm View they were setting up for a wedding party with coloured streamers and Christmas decorations. The traditional wedding was held in the village a week ago, with the church wedding and reception earlier in the day, and now this evening the party for close friends and family. While all this was going on, Eric had picked up their room key as well as the room key for Louise and Edna and got the key stuck in the door lock. Edna had undone the screws with a knife but to no avail, finally Eric used his pocket knife to gradually work the key back and remove it. After Edna screwed the handle back on, the correct key could be used to unlock the door but not before Eric had been hit in the head. Now everyone is hiding their room key so Eric won't repeat this mistake again.

The party went on to the early hours in the morning, but as we were all tired, everyone went to sleep not bothered about the loud music.

Sunday 13 January 2008

Today is going to be a long day with worship services at 8:30am in Lira and 2:00pm in Akai, both with baptisms, confirmation and Holy Communion. At Lira there were 2 baptisms and 7 confirmations, while at Akia there were 9 baptisms and 34 confirmations. During the service at Lira there were two offerings, one for the church, and one for the Sunday school. It was truly great to worship with both congregations and celebrate with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Also at Lira, certificates and diplomas were handed out to people who had completed bible study courses through the Lutheran Media Ministry Uganda (LMMU).

After the worship service at Lira, two events occurred. The first was an auction of eggs and satchels of coffee, and the second event was the handing of a bicycle Louise bought for the Sunday School teacher so that person can get around the houses and villages to make contact with the children. The bicycle has been bought from one of the persons who used a micro credit loan to establish his bicycle repair shop in Lira.

After the worship service in Akai we were treated to singing from the children in the Sunday school, and the ladies in the choir. Their singing and dancing is inspirational as they put body and soul into everything they do. They laughed as some of the mission team joined in the dancing, but as our coordination was somewhat out, we really did stand out amongst the Africans. Once the dancing had finished, we were treated like royalty to a fully cooked meal of beans, chips, chicken, cassava and sesame seeds followed by a cup of tea. It was a humbling experience for us all sitting under the mango tree eating while the Africans watched. We felt as though we were taking the food out of their mouths but was happy to see that a little later on food and drink was passed on to everyone. We didn't leave until late as the speeches by invited people went on for some time, but were very interesting. They challenged to congregation to expand their horizons and increase the size of their congregation by spreading the good news.

By the time we got back to the resort we were covered in red dust, extremely tired, and wanting a cold drink. Unfortunately the power had been off for some time so the beer and sodas were just cool, but they were refreshing.

After dinner most images and video clips of the cameras were downloaded to the laptop computer as most of us are filling up the memory cards rather quickly. We have so many images and recorded songs to share when we get back into Australia. As we only have 4 days left in Lira, we now have to prioritise the places we want to visit before we head off to Mercindi and Murchison Falls.

By the time we had finished dinner, the conversation got slower to match our energy levels before everyone slipped back to their rooms to read the next Empower session for tomorrow before slipping into deep sleep. I am sure we are all slowing down due to the heat and the continual activities.

Monday 14 January 2008

The evil spirits were working in various ways during the night and in the morning trying to prevent us from reaching our groups firstly through dreams, a puncture in the outside dual tyre on the truck, a facilitator turning up at the church instead of the camp. But God is stronger than evil spirits and through prayer; nothing stopped us from getting with our clients. The steps today and the follow up session tomorrow are crucial in allowing the clients to talk in small groups (3 or 4) about a stressful or traumatic event twice. During the reflection time when all the small groups were gathered, clients were asked to rate the event the first time they told the story, and then how they felt the second time. All clients who spoke said they were less stressful the second time than the first. They have now discovered another tool to relieve the stress built inside using breathing, tongue twisters and pressure exercises when the stress is getting too high.

A concern all the team has felt since arriving in Lira is how the finances, micro credit loan approvals, and allocation of funds are divided amongst the congregations. We praise God that an agreement has been reached to establish an account that includes all congregations in and around Lira, including establishing and supporting a new congregation in Gulu under the care of Pastor Johnston. A committee of representatives from all congregations will be formed to create a vision for the work that needs to be done, compile a list of priorities and funding requirements, with bank statements forwarded to each congregation as well as for St. Luke's Nambour. Praise the Lord as we see the divisions that existed gradually being resolved providing a path toward unity and an empowerment within the Lutherans in the district.

After we finished the Empowerment program the team went to several places. One was to visit the farm of William and his wife to see their bricklaying, cassava, fruit trees and the process in which the shred cassava into flakes, cook it on a BBQ plate turning it into fast food where a person only needs to add water to make a meal. Another group went to visit a plant nursery that could be

contracted to supply grafted fruit trees in the wet season for the people in Akia. We also went shopping for large plastic washing bowls, soap, cups and bowls for the 5 villages around the Farm View Stay Resort. Late in the afternoon Emma and Christopher from St. Luke's Lira came out to visit and present us with gifts for the offerings and presents we gave to the children in the Sunday School.

Tuesday 15 January 2008

The days are becoming more eventful as our stay in Lira is coming to an end as so many people taking part in the Empower program invite us to visit their homes, places or work, or other places of interest. We are sure that we could spend another couple of weeks visiting places and listening to their stories as they plead for financial assistance and guidance. One of the issues we face within the mission team is where should our limited financial resources we have brought with us be directed for everywhere you look the needs are great and worthy of assistance. For example, one project is for the people of Akia who would benefit from trees being planted in their village to help feed and provide timber. They have already named aligned the different tree species to the names of the mission team, i.e. passion fruit (Nathan); pine trees (Stephanie); mango (Edna); jackfruit (Rod); guava (Jackie); orange (Louise); avocado (Eric); and pawpaw (Tony). Another project would be to assist the headmaster, the 15 Board of Directors, the Chaplin Rev. Nelson, the volunteer teachers and the 300 secondary students at Olaka Lutheran boarding and day school which is about 4km out of Lira. The students come from the IDP camps and are mostly orphans, abducted children or suffering from HIV/AIDS. The school receives no financial assistance even though they provide meals, sleep on mats as they have no beds, have to hire science equipment for classes, have no library, no power, the well is about 1km away, students have to provide their own medical care as well as pay 50,000 shillings per academic term unless they have an exemption. The school has been established on a rental property, and it is their goal to either purchase the existing land and buildings, or to raise sufficient funds to purchase their own property and build their own school. When we got back into Lira each of the mission teams began purchasing essential items for each of the groups undertaking the Empower program such as rice, beans, cooking oil, bibles, bags of cement, photos so each group member receives one of their group. The last event for the evening was to design a certificate of graduation from the Empower Program for each client. These will be printed in Lira and presented with the photo on Thursday when we complete the training course. Tonight as we had our daily devotion and circle of prayer, each one of the mission team prayed about the way in which we have been touched by the transformation Empower Program, and also for the people of Uganda who have, and continue to suffer.

From the stories we have heard in the sessions and from the people in the community, we find it hard to understand how some of the officials in the government have, up until now, supported some of the activities by the LRA and Karamojong warriors (cattle rustlers), inflicting such trauma on its people.

We pray Lord that our prayers will be answered so that peace will come to the whole of Uganda and many more people will give generously of their time and resources to provide spiritual care and provide the basics of life such as health, education and communication.

Wednesday 16 January 2008

On our way to the Empowerment training this morning Robert stopped at the main police station to introduce us to his District Superintendent, a well spoken Christian man who promotes the role of the Church and personal commitment to Christ as being the foundation of a good policeman as well as for the benefit of the whole community. Roberts immediate boss is just the same and welcomed us with open arms and said that if he could, he would lock us up to stop us going back to Australia as they need us in Lira.

As we arrived at St. Luke's we were introduced to a consultant from Kenya now working with the secondary school in Olaka seeking advice on what information they should be collecting in

preparation for compiling a submission to AusAID for funding. We will email the submission guidelines and requirements when we get back to Australia.

Today's session was about forgiveness and because the clients have such a strong faith, the bible texts have so much meaning. This made it easy for them to understand that unless they truly believe in forgiveness, the poison will not go away and they will remain traumatised. This afternoon was rather hectic taking images of the groups to the photographic studio for processing, one for each participant. Next we headed off to the Internet café to send Lynne the latest version of the diary and check the telephone number for Ethiopian Airlines so we could confirm our seats out of Entebbe on Monday. Since the number on the website was the same as that given to us by the travel agency, we sent them an email to confirm our bookings and requested they ring Nathan to let us know we have seats on that flight.

Next stop was the printing shop to have the certificates printed for the clients. Just after they saved the file to the hard drive on the computer a fierce storm struck and the power went off. Let's hope the power comes on so they are ready to be picked up in the morning before the last Empowerment session.

This evening we have invited a number of guests back with us to help translate some of the Lutheran liturgy into Lou so they can use their songs in African instead of the liturgy out of the black hymnal. Rev. Nelson and his wife, Evelyn, James and Robert are excellent singers, and with Robert studying for the ministry, his advice and input is essential.

During our stay, the children from 5 villages around the compound have met us every morning and afternoon with their smiles, waves and most of all, masoongs riding on the back of a truck. So this afternoon we put together packages of large plastic washing bowls, soap, balls, frisbee, cups, water containers, eating bowls and other items collected over the past couple of weeks and distributed them to the leaders in the village. At times the excitement was so great, they tried to snatch items out of the large washing bowl as they have so little, and a number of the children are orphans and being cared for by relatives and friends. One young girl saw her mother and father shot by the LRA, and as an orphan, is living with friends but would like to raise enough money to attend secondary school (the government does not purchase books etc) and then go onto university to become a doctor. As we walked back to the compound Rev. Nelson and his wife, Evelyn, James and Robert and the remaining mission team were singing African songs at the front gate. It was fantastic to look at the faces of the children as they joined in the songs, danced and clapped while some of the women from the camps watched on.

Sharing our meal this evening with Rev. Nelson and his wife, Evelyn, James and Robert was a blessing and one of the most exciting highlights was seeing the eyes of Evelyn as she saw and heard herself on the laptop computer for the first time. It was late in the evening before they left, but tonight we might have to go without a shower as the water pump seems to have broken down. Never mind, could be worse, we could be taking a splash wash behind a small screen while standing in a plastic washing bowl.

Thursday 17 January 2008

The tasks we had to do this morning before going for the last session seemed so simple, except we are in Lira and time is measured in African time. When we arrived at the publishers the certificates were not yet completed, so Nathan and Tony walked around to the photo development shop to pick up the photos of the Empowerment groups. The photos were not ready but come back in ½ hour. Shortly afterwards the wasoongo truck arrived with the certificates, so Nathan decided to walk to the church while the other team members set off for their villages. Tony had to wait around 1 hour for the photos because the owners of the store didn't want to keep their Lira customers otherwise they might get upset and take their business somewhere else. The idea was to hand out the certificate to each graduate with a photo of their group, so by the time Tony got to the church, we had to ask one of the participants to ride his motorbike out to Akai with the photos. Never mind, all went well and the feedback from all the clients was extremely positive as they told of how the program, combined with the exercises and understanding of forgiveness has already helped them to

overcome some of the hurt and trauma they have suffered over a number of years. It truly was a blessing to see that in such a small way, we have assisted the clients to take control of their own destiny and bring hope back into their lives.

The hardest moment came when we had to say goodbye to our dear friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ who we have grown to love over the short time we have been in Lira. Some of the immediate results include the willingness and purpose of the congregation at St. Luke's Lira to build the brick walls between the pillars that hold up the church roof. Some members of the congregation have committed bricks, bags of cement (Nathan and Tony each purchased a bag of cement toward the construction), and the chairman going to announce this Sunday they will hold a working bee (after we explained the meaning) to make the remaining mud bricks as one of the congregation members donated 1000 from the stock he was about to fire. Similar commitments came from Akia to complete the thatched roof for the church building.

Team members received gifts from the participants which really touched our hearts, and in the villages, they had prepared a meal as a way of saying thankyou.

We all met back at Roberts's shop where James presented the shirts and dresses we had ordered. James had taken our measurements the previous week and spent every night sewing the garments using the material we had chosen. Nathan presented Robert with a new NIV bible, while James received Nathan's personal NIV bible complete with notes and underlined passages. Both were extremely grateful, especially James as he will use it from his seminary studies.

We had promised the congregations one complete set of musical instruments, so we did the tour of Lira searching to traditional string instruments to enhance their worship services. Finally we found a shop late in the afternoon, so after Robert dropped us back at farm Stay, Robert, James and Patrick we heading back to the shop to collect the instruments. It is a pity that we will not be there on Sunday to hear their first service with musical instruments to accompany their magnificent voices. Evelyne will also be able to use the instruments as accompaniment as we have suggested she records her gospel songs on CD in one of the local recording studios and sell them to supplement her income.

On the way home we contemplated what will happen tomorrow afternoon when the wosoongo bus doesn't take the journey along the same road we have driven for the past 12 days as everyday the kids come running out to wave and greet us morning and evening, and the adults give us cherry waves and greetings as well.

Tonight as we sat and reflected on the past couple of weeks there was a flat feeling in our hearts as the course was completed, however we were reassured that now that the clients have the skills and knowledge of Empowerment, we have made a difference in their lives, and the assurance the leaders will spread the program afar.

Our last night at Farm Stay is busy washing last minute dirty items and packing for the trip to Masindi. Most of us have lightened our luggage somewhat haven't given gifts and distributing the catechisms.

Friday 18 January 2008

Leaving day bringing sorry to leave our great hosts John and Florance and her staff at Farm View and headed for the church where we were greeted with some of the congregation members playing the string instruments we bought for them yesterday. What a fantastic sound given they only had such a little time to learn the instruments let alone able to play tunes. Once again tears flowed as gifts were presented and the final goodbyes sunk in. We all want to return, but when is an issue. A taxi had been hired to take us to Masindi and the trip took about 4 hours along bitumen roads onto a short cut dirt road. Along the way however, we experienced our first case of anxiety and concern when we slowed down to take photos of the baboons and the Nile River, an armed soldier stopped the taxi and took the digital cameras from Jackie and Edna, the others hid their out of sight. After some negotiation between Emma and the soldier, he returned the cameras after being paid 10,000 shillings, apparently this is a common occurrence with white tourists and all depends on

which soldier stops you, and the money is not shared. One does not argue, as there was a military camp up on the bank of the Nile.

Finally we reached Masindi and stopped in to visit a project run by Jane to teach women how to sow. Many of the young girls are orphans, some are from other regions, while others are pregnant young girls under 18 years. The men don't want to own up as they will go to jail for defilement. Around 80% of male offenders are in there because of defilement, and a family that condones underage marriage can also be sent to jail. We also learned that around 80% of the population in Uganda live under the poverty line which is 2,000 shillings or \$2AUD a day.

The hotel in which we were originally booked didn't have sufficient rooms to accommodate all of the team, so the search began to find accommodation. We finally chose the Masindi Hotel that was established in 1932. A magnificent hotel, steeped in tradition with large rooms, huge bath, splendid dining room, bar and open areas.

Henry joined us this afternoon to take over the responsibility for the masoongos from Masindi back to Kampala and onto the flight from Entebbe. As we enjoyed dinner, many stories were told about people's lives, the history of the Lutheran Church in Uganda, the Empowerment Program and the Lutheran Church in Lira.

During dinner Nathan led devotion, but by 8:30pm when dinner ended, everyone was that tired that we decided to go to bed as tomorrow we are up at 5:00am for our adventure to Murchison Falls.

Saturday 19 January 2008

We were all up bright and early this morning and headed in for breakfast as today will be a long one. The taxi arrived at 5:45am and everyone was ready to leave by 6:00am, right on time. The first part of the trip out to the 3,840 sq. km Murchison Falls, Uganda's largest national park began in the dark as the sun only comes up around 7:00am, and we reached the first gate into the national park at 6:30am. The guard came out to greet us and gladly accepted the park entry fee of \$25USD and although open hours are not until 7:00am, he opened the gate and we were on our way. A short distance into the park Nathan burst in song "Guide Me O Though Great Jehovah" as the sun peaked over the horizon and the side of a hill, and even though we were travelling through rain forest with wild animals such as deer, guinea fowls, baboons, monkeys, all colours and sizes of birds to the tune matched the occasion. The 60km road (track) matches the safari experience; thank God our taxi had relatively new seats with good springs, as we certainly needed it. The gate to Murchison Falls was armed, as is the whole park to prevent poachers entering and killing the animals. Decision time, should we take the boat ride to the falls first and then the safari ride through the game park, or the other way round? The decision was made for us as the boat had developed a transmission problem requiring a part to be welded, so we set off across the River Nile on the barge. The depth of the Nile where we cross is around 76 feet, but much deeper in other parts. On the river bank were hippos asleep in the river and a couple of buffalo walking along the bank. Well we thought the hippos were asleep, but as the buffalo got closer to them, a hippo sprung out of the water and tried to catch it, it missed and slipped back into the river.

On the other side, our driver arranged for an armed guide to escort us through the park as he will be able to direct the driver where to go find the animals, and be able to identify their species and provide background information. As we didn't have any water, we stopped in at the Mweya Safari Lodge up on the hill overlooking the Nile and the barge.

The guide directed the driver as to which tracks he should take and it wasn't long before we came across giraffe, buffaloes, elephant, hartebeest, warthog and birdlife (over 350 different species) as they roamed free in the park. Unfortunately we did not see any lions, as we were there in the heat of the day. It is a huge park and you can only see a small part in a half-day tour, however if you feel adventurous, you could book a camping safari staying inside a locked compound, or be even more adventurous and sleep in a tent out in the park, of course both types of adventure come with an armed guide. We stopped in the shade of a tree on the shore of Lake Albert and watched the fishermen in a boat catching Tilapia. They are allowed to come into the shallows, but if they come

into the park they will be arrested for poaching. We also noticed up on one of the rise there was an army post fortified with a tank and some heavy artillery to stop the rebels and poachers crossing Lake Albert. The Nile acted as a natural barrier preventing the LRA from crossing and working their way down toward Masindi, but we were assured that there are army posts all along the Nile as it winds its way through Uganda.

Back to the barge to check if the ferry had been fixed, and although they had just finished and got the engine started, the 2:00pm ferry was fully booked for the 3hr trip, so we asked the driver to take us to the top of the falls instead.

While it would have been good to take the 3 hr return boat journey up the Nile and possibly see more wildlife on the banks, when we got to the top of the 40m falls, the view and thundering sound of the water forced through the narrow 6m wide cleft causing clouds of misty spray up into the air certainly dispelled any disappointment. Such power washing over the rocks and creating a mist that flew up into the sky as the wind came up through the gorge, enough to wet anyone standing up on top of the cliff. With everyone filled with amazement to what we had witnessed today in the park and at the falls, it was time to head back to the hotel to shower, have a drink or two out in the cool, and prepare for dinner. One could imagine back in the colonial times how rich Englishmen and their wives strutted the wide corridors, feasted in the plush dining room with the antique wood carvings, and waited on by the servants while the peasants were locked out by high walls and guards. This really is luxury even today, but thankfully the restrictions and apartheid of the past is replaced with the major barrier today the cost of a room and a meal.

Tonight as we had dinner we again discussed a range of topics, and as this will be the last night we have the pleasure of Robert and James who head back to Lira after worship service in the morning, and we now become the responsibility of Henry to get us to Kampala.

Sunday 20 January 2008

After a very peaceful sleep, this morning was a leisurely breakfast and packing before church. A taxi had been ordered for 9:30am, however it failed to arrive, so we started to walk to the taxi rank when Emma spotted a friend who was driving a taxi and we were able to hop in and he took us to the church which was around 8km out of Masindi.

When we arrived there was a water boring tuck working flat out in the front yard. Paravista Lutheran Church had donated funds for the bore, and had asked Eric and Nathan to investigate its progress, so they can report back that they have struck water at 60m and were waiting for more casing before completing the work.

As we were late, the congregation was waiting, but what a magnificent service with Pastor Nathan giving the address and officiating Holy Communion. After the service, just as the boring rig stopped for a welcomed break, the choir sang two beautiful songs and as the speeches and the introduction of wasoongos began, the boring rig started again.

There was a mix-up with the taxi, however the most modern and comfortable taxi we have seen so far in Uganda arrived to take us back to the hotel, and then on to Kampala.

Storing the entire luggage in one room made it easy to load the luggage into the taxi, say our tearful farewells to Robert, James and Emma before heading off to Kampala. The taxi drive took a longer route, however it was worth it as the road was much smoother, especially the bitumen section.

Along the way we stopped at roadside stalls and a market for water, hot corn on the cob, the driver several bunches of green bananas, Henry a bag of lemons, and later on lady finger bananas. By the time we got to Kampala it was around 6:30pm, a 4:30 hour journey, it was great to check into the Olympia Hotel where we stayed when we first arrived in Uganda.

After sorting out the sleeping arrangements, we headed off to find something to eat and so the fun began. The traffic and people was something to experience, and in our haste to walk up the road, Eric didn't see a culvert and like Mr. Magoo, disappeared into the culvert and all you could see was his nose, glasses and the top of his head. Fun thing though, just prior to doing the disappearing trick, he had mentioned to Louise not to trip in the pot holes. Apart from some bruising on the rib cage and dirt marks on his pants, he was okay and was able to walk off some of the effects. Finding

a good place to eat was another thing, plenty of food for sale, but not cooked in the most hygienic manner. Pastor Nathan led his flock further and further up the road until got to an ice cream and pizza place. One look at the pizza and we all decided this was not for us but the ice cream looked okay. Since it was a general store, between us we bought packets of potato chips, ice cream, biscuits, soft drink, fruit juice and a couple of bowls of freshly cooked chip. We figured that if a man could live on three chocolate bars for three weeks, this junk food binge will sustain us until breakfast.

Everyone was feeling satisfied so we headed back through the people and traffic to the hotel where Nathan spoke about the power of prayer here in Uganda and our prayer partners in Australia and abroad for protecting us through out our mission trip and brought us back to Kampala. We joined in the blessing and went our own ways to prepare for our journey home tomorrow.

Monday/Tuesday 21/22 January 2008

The sleep did us all good even though during the night there was a thunderstorm with heavy rain which brought out the frogs and other creatures including two dogs that fought for what seemed like hours. By 8am we were all packed, bags in the lobby and ready for breakfast and reflections on the whole Uganda experience and how God has lead us and protected us regardless of the situations.

The devotion and prayer time was special as this was the last time we could do so with Henry who together with the Noah, James and Robert have been by our side all the time since we stepped off the plane to make sure that we didn't get lost and could negotiate on our behalf so we didn't pay too much for products and services.

The taxi driver turned up at 8:45am so we stored the luggage in one room while we went off to shop in tourism shopping centre of native artefacts in the heart of Kampala. If you think we have traffic jams, try driving around Kampala with trucks, busses, cars, motorbikes, bicycles and people dodging and weaving sometimes making four lanes out of two. Since we wanted to be back at the hotel by 1: pm everyone rushed off to source the gifts for family and friends. As this was the low season for tourists the shop attendants were more willing to barter, although some stuck to their set prices. As you are all aware, shopping is a thirsty experience and everyone enjoyed cold drinks and a real luxury we have missed since leaving Australia, a toasted ham and cheese sandwich.

A quick cleanup up back in the hotel and repack our bags to fit in the purchases, luggage on board the taxi, and the final drive through Kampala before reaching Entebbe airport where parting with Henry, our rock and protector was another emotional experience. As we arrived at the airport early, we had to wait our turn to check in our luggage from Entebbe through to Brisbane, clear customs before walking through the duty free shops to see if there were any further traditional African artefacts that could be purchased. While there we spotted a fridge with real ice cream, our taste buds were now getting ready for the food back home. The flight from Entebbe will take us to Addis Ababa, Bangkok and Hong Kong on Ethiopian Airlines transferring in Hong Kong to Cathay Pacific for the direct flight to Brisbane.

Along the way we crossed 5 times zones and seemed like an eternity, and although most of us had reservations about flying Ethiopian Airways, their aircraft had the most comfortable seats, more leg room, courteous staff and excellent food, a little too much in fact or was it that we were getting a little tired of airways food.

We all sang Glory and Praise to God when we finally got to Hong Kong, as this has been a mammoth journey getting out of Africa. Our next challenge for some of the team was to get through the security scanner up to the departure hall as some had bought alcohol in Addis Ababa where it was extremely cheap, however due to their non-compliance with international duty free standards to seal the duty free purchases and attach the receipts, they had to go out through immigration having their passports stamped as entering Hong Kong, then immediately go through check-in and customs declaring the alcohol where they placed the items in a sealed box to go into the hold of the aircraft, lets hope they arrive in one piece in Brisbane.

Walking through the duty free shops and comparing prices for what you could purchase items in Australia revealed that the prices are, in most instance, more expensive that back home. We settled

for light refreshments while waiting until flight CX103 for Brisbane was due to leave at 12:50pm from gate 71 at the far end of the airport. A good time to wind down for the long flight back home and as we waited not only did tiredness rush upon us, but the realisation that our mission into Africa was coming to a quick end.

Wednesday 23 January 2008

We were told at check-in that the flight will be full, so the possibility of spreading across several seats was soon dashed. Never mind, we were on board and heading home to family and friends to tell them of our Empower stress and trauma rehabilitation experiences, and the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of Africa, it will be in our blood and heart for ever, including the red dust.

The flight home was smooth and relaxing, with most of getting the best sleep we have had on a flight for a long time, maybe it was the body knowing that we were on our way home. Early in the morning I (Tony) lifted the shade on the window only to be blinded by brilliant sunshine and a view of Australia and the Gulf of Carpentaria and immediately the words of 'A mighty fortress is our God' sprang into mind as He throughout this mission trip had been our trusty shield and weapon, our faithful helper in all need, no matter what had happen. He had overcome the old evil foe, we were shielded from all kinds of deadly woe; deep guile and great might which are his dread arms in fight; on earth he has no equal.

During the flight over Australia we saw some of the floods but it was hard to pick out locations as the cloud cover was intensive. Then the moment we were waiting to hear from the Captain, good morning, we are around 180 Km from Brisbane and will soon make our descent into Brisbane from the North as the winds are from the South-East, we hope you have enjoyed your flight. Oh, yeah, praise God our entire luggage arrived as well.

We were expecting our walk through customs wasn't going to be simply as everyone had ticked nearly every item that needs to be declared except food and we weren't disappointed. Some had a little harder time than others, some having to have items sent away for fumigation, others having to go into the office and wash our boots and shoes, while some simply unpacked items they declared and cleared. Then, one by one, we filed out into the hall to be welcomed by friends and family and most appreciated by all members of the mission team. Nathan and Eric were the last to emerge as Nathan had the African drum which had to be sent away for fumigation but will be able to pick it up at a later date.

Before departing the airport we sang an African gospel song, Nathan said a short prayer giving thanks for a safe mission trip, and then into the vehicles for the journey home, hot shower, giving out of gifts, and a well earned sleep.

Reflections by Tony:

Your intrepid computer man and trust scribe has enjoyed typing these brief notes throughout our mission trip, hopefully they have in some way reflected the fun, eventful and sad moments we as a close mission team have experienced over the past three weeks. There is a lot missing, some too personal to make public, especially the stories of atrocity shared by the participants in our Empower groups which will remain in our hearts and minds forever and will like now, bring tears to my eyes. The mission trip has certainly opened my eyes to the possibilities for outreach in the future and knows that if at all possible, I WILL return to Lira and continue the work that has been started.

Obanga mi wu gum. Apwo yo Yesu. Obanga Ber

(God bless you. Thank you Jesus. God is good)