

Redeeming Refugee Lives in Kenya – Anne’s placement report Spring 2020

While developing therapeutic services for refugees and asylum seekers for *Solace Surviving Exile and Persecution* in Yorkshire, encountering the reality of global conflict and persecution in our consulting rooms was a daily occurrence. Meeting many people from South to North Africa through to the Middle and Far East, I was aware that despite the propaganda about ‘refugees flooding’ into Europe, more than 80% of the worldwide refugee population lived in neighbouring countries. I was curious to know how refugees with mental health difficulties managed in those contexts, and was also keen to learn how I could contribute my knowledge and skill in working with traumatized refugees outside of the UK.

As I considered how to go about it, I then remembered *Christians Abroad (CAB)*, with whom I had worked some 20 years earlier to facilitate the reintegration of people who had been working abroad in missions to life back in the UK. The CAB program in Kenya which was seeking trauma counsellors to work with refugees captured my attention. I was especially interested in their group therapy approach, which appeared to have good outcomes. After a few months *Christians Abroad* had arranged all the necessary details and I was enroute to Kenya.

With the expert guidance of Kefah Maranga, the founding Director of the Centre for Training and Development (CfTD), I became involved with their recently established Hand of Hope program for refugees in Kitengela, a rapidly growing city south of Nairobi. CfTD, which operates throughout the region, functions much like a UK further education college offering vocationally oriented courses. With Kenya's high rate of unemployment, these courses are popular as skill development and qualifications are the keys to the future for many.

Ever since Kefah worked at Dedaab, Africa’s largest refugee camp near the border with Somalia, he has retained a passion and commitment to support the mental health needs of refugees. As Kitengela hosts a population of 8000 refugees, he decided together with his friends Dedan and Jackson, with whom he worked at Save The Children UK, and the Centre for Victims of Torture (CVT) in Nairobi, to develop a program to support and empower refugees. Without any financial support and working voluntarily, they set up free English language classes at CfTD and offered 10 session trauma focused therapy groups. Based upon the CVT Restoring Hope and Dignity model, the groups involved psychoeducation about the effects of trauma, building resilience, processing trauma and integration.

During my time, I was able to participate in a young people’s group, a women’s group and a pastor’s group with most participants from Eastern Congo (DRC) and Burundi. The language of choice was Swahili with English mixed in and helpful translations by Kefah and Dedan for my benefit. While my time was short, I was able to witness the growing ease and confidence amongst the participants. Based on outcome measures collected during the assessments prior to the groups and at follow up, Jackson’s data analysis has demonstrated positive and long lasting benefits for their members.

As part of my work at CfTD, I delivered some training sessions to psychology students and practicing counselors where I was struck by the warmth and mutual support they gave one another. Although the classrooms were sparse, comprised largely of plastic garden chairs and a blackboard, the certificates were very impressive. Multi-coloured, gold embossed certificates were bestowed to each student individually by the director along with handshakes, cheering, clapping and much photography.

For three weeks, I stayed in a village with Kefah and his family, where I learned to milk a goat and pluck a chicken. While wandering alone in Kitengela, I soon learned that I was *mzungu* which is Swahili for white person. Aside from the stunning wildlife national parks, where I encountered western tourists, I didn't meet any other *mzungus* during this time. To me, *Mzungu* felt like an affectionate name as it was usually said with warmth and curiosity, never with any hostility.

In discussions with Kefah, Didan and Jackson, known to me as the 'trinity' team as they brought diverse and complementary skills while sharing a common faith and commitment, I was inspired to think about how I could support the work of the Hand of Hope from the UK. Thus I have agreed to be a Field Officer for *Christians Abroad* to work together with them to promote and support the work of Hand of Hope and other CAB projects in Kenya. While Covid 19 is like a log stuck in a river, forcing the water to go around it, this work in Kitengela is continuing to bring hope and healing to refugees. The therapy groups are on hold due to social distancing rules, however Kefah and his team are moving forward with their planning to enable refugees to develop microbusinesses through their One Egg scheme to add to the therapeutic and English language programs. To learn more about the redemptive work of Hand of Hope and how you can support this work, please contact....