

Ministry of Word and Deed in Karamoja

A Fresh Perspective from a First Time Visitor

Rev. Christopher Cashen
OPC Evangelist to Refugees in Clarkston, GA
Member, OPC Committee on Diaconal Ministries
May 2019



OP Missionary Rev. David Robbins and translator presenting the word of God to patients waiting outside the mission's medical clinic

The ministry of mercy is alive and well in Karamoja. But it is never done alone. Not only was it a blessing and encouragement to see the grand scope of the work being done, but to hear the consistent proclamation of the word of God alongside, even leading the way, of these deeds of mercy and kindness.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Matthew 25:35-36 (ESV)

What do you picture when OPC missionaries are mentioned? When you pray for the work of our missionaries in foreign lands, how do you pray? When you consider the work of a specific field, what kind of work comes to mind?

Usually when I anticipate experiencing something new, I create an image in my mind as to what I expect to see. However, in May 2019, when I was given the extraordinary opportunity of visiting the OP Uganda Mission with Mark Bube and David Nakhla, any pictures I had created were quickly erased. Uganda is a land of wonder and great possibilities for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The land is beautiful; full of wildlife, majestic mountains, and flat lands. And what I found to be most glorious was the work that the Lord is doing in and through our missionaries at the mission station in Karamoja.

Diaconal Work in Karamoja

Diaconal work is being done by some very special people in Karamoja, which is really in the African bush. Cattle, sheep, and goats use the same roads and paths for travel as do their owners. In fact, these beasts have living quarters in the center of each village. It is dry, it is dusty, and it is fairly warm. Showers are cold, there are no fans, and certainly no air conditioning. Life is simple and good. When I visited, the rainy season had not yet started in earnest.

Akisyon A Yesu Presbyterian Clinic

Jesus Christ Himself said that He came not for the healthy, but for the sick (Mark 2:17). Jesus came to call sinners to Himself. As there are many in Karamoja who need a doctor, one of the OPC's first works in Karamoja was the establishment of a medical clinic in 2001. The clinic recently moved across the "street" into a beautiful new facility. While the building is certainly impressive, it is the staff that is truly spectacular. From intake, to getting vital signs, to lab work, to nurses, this is a full service, modern, loving, medical clinic -- in the middle of the African bush. I was told that people come to the clinic from distant places, for they know that the care they will receive is the best in the area. Isn't this exactly what the world should see as the church reflects Jesus?

Missionary Deacon/Doctor Flip Beardman, MD, Clinic Director, serves on the field with his dear wife, Anneloes, and their infant daughter. His dedication to providing the best care and showing the love of Christ is evident in his gentle manner. Missionary **Christopher Verdick** serves as the careful and kind administrator of the clinic, while his wife, Chloe, joyfully keeps the "books" for the entire Uganda Mission. Along with the clinic staff, they oversee the daily distribution of mercy in the form of diagnosis, medical treatment, and medicine.

Like Jesus, the clinic is not merely where one can receive loving, tender-hearted help for physical ailments. It is also where the word of God can bring to life broken and dead hearts. On the morning that I visited the clinic, as patients gathered in the open-air waiting area, missionary **David Robbins** entered with a translator to open the word of God. The ministry of mercy was rightly joined to the ministry of the word. The people heard and even participated in the clear presentation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Significantly, the patients were not the only ones to have received God's word that day, as Pastor Robbins had already led the clinic staff in a devotion before the patients arrived. What a joy to see the ministry of word and deed pressing on at the Akisyon A Yesu Presbyterian Clinic in Karamoja!

Community Health Team

The good work of the clinic does not stop at the doors of the clinic, but is taken into the surrounding villages by **Leah Hopp**. Serving as a Missionary Associate for ten years, Leah, along with staff of the clinic, takes a portion of the work of the clinic out into the surrounding villages. As they visit individual homes (mud huts with thatched roofs), Leah and her team provide health care education and training to the Karamajong right where they live. This provides a wonderful opportunity to show the love of Jesus to families in a one-on-one, or small group, setting.

Missionary Deacon Mark Van Essendelft

Moving down the dirt road from the clinic, after passing the open air church “building” on the left, the missionary compound begins to emerge amidst the trees with mountains as the backdrop. **Facilities Engineer/Missionary Deacon Mark Van Essendelft** lives there in the center of his ongoing and comprehensive work of mercy. Serving with his dear wife Carla and large family, this missionary deacon is daily pouring himself out in mercy upon the community of Karamoja.

After hearing that the Uganda Mission is the second largest employer in the area, I witnessed this for myself when on Monday through Friday, men and women come to the gate of the mission compound seeking work. Mark hires those he needs each day, assigning each one a task: some “slash” (that means cutting the grass with a golf club like sickle); some clear out overgrown bushes and trees (watching out for Puff Adders which appear seemingly from nowhere); some prepare the fields for planting this year’s cotton crop, and some use hoes to plant cotton seed.

It was such a tremendous encouragement to see that, as those wanting work waited on the logs at the entrance to the compound, Mark delivered a brief devotional. It was translated into Karamajong, and was targeted at their hearts. The word of God preceded, or went before, and thus accompanied, the work that was offered. After the devotional, the group (which could number 60 or 70) set off to their respective work places.

Once the workforce was set, Mark quickly moved on to other aspects of his extensive work. That day, he continued evaluating the needs of the clinic’s staff housing, oversaw the necessary maintenance on the compound, and checked out the house for the new missionary family expected later this year. Not only did Mark ensure that the pumps for water were functioning properly, he also sketched out some additions to be made to the house so that the new family will be well accommodated.

Karamoja Education Outreach (KEO)

Across the street from the clinic is a small green building which houses the Karamoja Education Outreach (KEO) program. Started by Martha Wright, and now overseen by Missionary Associate **Angela Voskuil**, KEO is what we might call in the US a “pre-school” program for children from the surrounding villages. When I attended, there were about 55 to 60 Karamajong children sitting on the concrete floor, singing songs, being very attentive, listening to accounts from Scripture, learning English and math, and hearing books being read to them. Wow! These children, possibly the future of the church there in Karamoja, are receiving an education certainly, but even more importantly, they are learning the truths of the Christian faith! The staff of 18, who are lovingly led by Angela, also receive a devotion each morning prior to the arrival of the children. Once again, here in Karamoja, the word of God precedes the work of the people of God and bathes each part of the ministry of deed such that it is done in His power.

PHOTOS



ABOVE: OP Missionary Deacon Mark Van Essendelft and translator deliver a devotion to those waiting for daily work at the gates of the OP Uganda Mission compound in Karamoja.

*BELOW: Top: Typical dwelling in Karamoja; David Nakhla and Mark Van Essendelft.
Bottom: Clinic staff member and Dr. Flip Beardman; church meeting place in Karamoja.*

