

# Report on Visit to APRECOM

---

August 2019

By Susie Howe

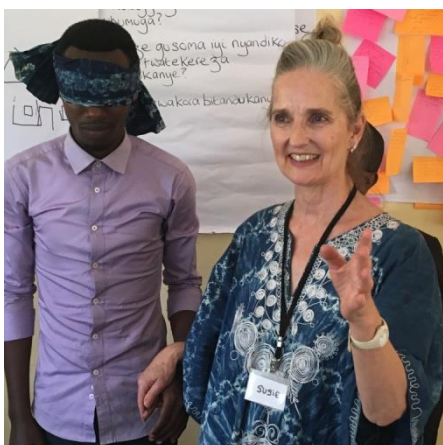


‘There is a fire in this room!’ exclaimed one pastor during a workshop that I ran for church leaders in the past couple of weeks in Ngoma, Rwanda. Fortunately he wasn’t referring to a physical fire, but rather the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit, as we taught on the care and inclusion of children with disability from a contextualised, Biblical perspective.

Throughout the entire trip, we experienced the empowering and enabling of the Holy Spirit and his amazing leading and guidance. I thank God for all those of you who were praying for this and for the entire trip. In my prayer requests before I left, I wrote, ‘Please pray that we will keep in step with Holy Spirit; be daily filled with his presence; be effective in imparting his truth and word throughout the trainings and that he will bring about outcomes that exceed all our expectations.’ These prayers were wonderfully answered above and beyond all we had hoped for, as you will read in a few of the highlights of my trip that follow. Thank you for being part of the adventure through your prayers and all glory to God for his goodness and faithfulness!

### **Training of churches in disability care and inclusion**

As is the case globally, children with disability in Rwanda are often marginalised, isolated and outcast – even by the Church. That’s why a key focus of my trip was to train 80 church leaders from 20 churches in the care and inclusion of children with disability, using *Transform Disability* the training resource that BCT has produced for this purpose. Work-shops took place in Ruyenzi and Ngoma. (Another workshop planned for Nyamata had to be postponed due to government officials calling a three-line-whip meeting with church leaders in that town on the same day.) The workshops were transformational. Those who walked into them at the beginning were not the same by the time they walked out at the end!



At the start of the trainings they all shared very negative views of children and adults living with disability, describing them as being, ‘weak’, ‘deformed’, ‘having abnormalities and mental deficiencies’, and ‘missing body parts.’ By the end, they were describing them as being, ‘valuable’, ‘gifted’, ‘no different to us’ and ‘people that we can learn from’. They shared helpful insights into what people in their communities believe about why children are born disabled or become disabled in their early years. There are prevalent beliefs in Rwanda that if a couple have a disabled child it is because the ancestral spirits or a witch has cursed them. There is also a widely-held belief that the parents have sacrificed their child to the devil so that they can become financially rich. ‘Some

believe that there must be demons in the family or that anger in the family and bad relationships during the pregnancy has caused the disability’, shared one young woman. Others agreed that this is a commonly-held view as is the belief that disability is a punishment from God. No wonder parents hide their children away in shame in their homes and houses! Beliefs like these exist within and outside of the Church and create barriers to children with disability being included in church and community life.

However, through discussion groups, role-plays, participatory activities and Bible-teaching, attitudes and understanding were radically changed during the workshops. The Holy Spirit was powerfully, manifestly at work. ‘It’s like watching a fire pass from one person to another,’ said Pastor Anastase from Agape Church in Ruyenzi. ‘Our hearts and eyes are being opened,’ said a church leader in the Ngoma workshop. ‘I want to run out of here and start finding the children with disability in my community who are hidden away so that we can bring them into the open and start caring for them.’

By the end of the workshops, participants had all drawn up simple plans in their church groups for the next steps they will take to put the teaching into practice. They will all go and share what they have learned with their church members, then form teams to identify children with disability in their communities and begin to visit and befriend them. 'There is a huge gap in our churches that should be filled with people living with disabilities,' says Pastor Anastase in his closing speech. 'From this point that must change and it's we who must bring about the change.'

APRECOM's Coordinator Odeth Abakunda will follow up with those that have been trained and give ongoing support and teaching.

### Visit to Gahanga – meeting Jane again

I met Jane for the first time about 7 years ago. At that time she was a client of APRECOM's and ran the HIV support group. During that visit she shared her painful story of how she had become HIV positive as a result of being raped during the genocide. Her husband had been executed during the terrible 100 days of mass slaughter in 1994. Jane miraculously managed to stay alive in body but was dead inside and suicidal. A friend introduced her to APRECOM. She joined the support group, eventually turned to Christ and over time received healing in her mind and spirit. Not only that, but she went from strength to strength physically. Her energy and compassion led to her becoming the support group leader – a role she undertakes to this day.

Three years ago, Jane decided to train to become a church leader and is now one of the pastors at the local Nazareth Church. Then a year ago, she started a support group for parents of children with disability. She shared with me how this came about. 'We have so many children with disability here in Gahanga. I don't know why, but some children are born disabled and others develop infections that lead to disability. Most of these children are shunned by the local community and rarely come out of their houses because of the shame that their parents are made to feel. It broke my heart. So I went to Odeth and asked what I could do to help these children and their parents. She suggested I form a support group. So they started meeting at my house with their children once a week. We chat together, share encouragement, pray and build friendship. Gradually, those that came brought other families that they knew of in the same situation. So now we have up to 15 parents coming with their children. We also do home visits.' I am amazed at how God has turned Jane's tragedy to triumph. Having been carried by him through great adversity, she is now a living testament to the truth of 2 Corinthians 1: 3-4, *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*



Pastor Jane (L) and Odeth 1

### Visit to Mary and Henri

It was a joy during my trip to visit families with children with disability being supported by APRECOM. Here's a description of one such visit:

'Mary lays a blue mat on the concrete floor of a room that is virtually bare, except for a pile of yellow, plastic jerry cans heaped up in one corner. With effort, she then carries in Henri and lays him on the mat. At 13 years he is small for his age but heavy. Mary sits on the floor, leaning against the wall and sighs before sharing her story with Odeth and Emma, APRECOM's coordinators and me.

‘Henri was a very slow developer when he was a baby, but he eventually started to walk and seemed alright apart from being slow and not as bright as other children. But then his legs started giving way under him and he was always falling down. He doesn’t have fits but it’s as though his legs won’t work. He never speaks – just signs what he wants – and now he cannot stand, let alone walk.’ Like so many children with disability in Rwanda, Henri has not received the medical care, support and physiotherapy that he needs because his parents lack the money to pay for his care. As a result, his legs are now permanently contracted at right angles and he is unable to sit with them out in front of him. Neither does he have a wheelchair or any mobility aids. Henri feeds himself, enjoys his food and loves listening to music. ‘He completely changes when I put the radio on’, laughs Mary. ‘Music makes him so happy.’

Henri can also use a potty and fetches it himself when he wants to go to toilet. ‘I imagine he’ll soon be too big for a potty,’ I say to Mary. ‘It’s already too small for him’, Mary admits, ‘but I don’t know what else to use.’ I suggest she takes a plastic chair to the carpenter to have a hole cut in it and then pop a bucket underneath it. She can then place Henri on the chair and train him to use it as a commode. She thinks that’s a good idea and will give it a go.

The family only moved to this community a couple of years ago. ‘We had problems with the landlord of our last house,’ confides Mary. ‘When Henri became increasingly disabled, our landlord told us to leave, because he didn’t want a child like Henri in one of his houses. It was awful. So we came here. It’s better now. Most people are okay although there are still some who are unkind. That’s why I am happy to go to the support group. I can mix with women who understand.’

Mary converted from Islam to Christianity three years ago. ‘A Christian friend invited me to a church service and when I listened to what was being said I just wanted to follow Christ. He’s now my comforter.’ Emma shares some scripture and prays for Mary who begins to weep. ‘It means a lot to have people who care,’ she whispers.

### **Play therapy teaching**

Very few adults play with their children in this context – especially those with children with disability. Yet playing with them is a vital form of therapy to help stimulate their cognitive, motor and social skills and all their senses. It’s also fun! That’s why BCT has produced a teaching session on play therapy for children with disabilities. During this trip, I ran play therapy sessions for parent groups in Gahanga, Bugesera and Ngoma. The following is part of a description of the Gahanga session:

‘I bring out a couple of saucepans with spoons and gently bang them together. Nicky has lain listlessly on the floor up until now, just staring at the ceiling. As I beat the saucepan he rolls over and sits up, watching. Gradually he shuffles over on his bottom. He cannot speak, but picks up a wooden spoon and starts to copy me. ‘Bang’, bang, bang!’ A smile appears on his face. I demonstrate how to position him and then together we play with bowls of water and sponges, cups of beans and bean bags. Plastic bottles with rice take Nicky to a new high as he shakes them vigorously in both hands. At this point Paul, a little boy with microcephaly springs into action. Grabbing a rice shaker, he shakes it vigorously as though his life depends upon it. The women break into a spontaneous song and grab bottles filled with sand. The whole room is filled with singing and everyone is smiling. Piling up some plastic mugs to form a pyramid, I give Paul a ball to see if he can knock the mugs down with them. Screaming with delight,



Play therapy with Nicky 1



he throws the ball with real power, and although he misses the mugs each time, we clap and cheer him on. But his finest moment is on the veranda outside when we create skittles out of plastic bottles. Once again, Paul throws the ball at them with all he's got and this time manages to knock them down, much to everyone's delight. A silk wrap becomes a parachute under which we lay the children who become calm as they watch the diaphanous material floating above them. Nicky tries to grab and blow at a simple mobile that I have made out of bird feathers tied to a coat-hanger. The session has been a great success. 'I now know how important it is to play with my child and that I don't need expensive toys to do so,' smiles one mum. Pastor Jane promises to encourage the mums to put the ideas into practice during her home visits and to begin integrating play therapy into the support group. It's been a fun and worthwhile afternoon!

### **Mobilising a movement**

It's beautiful to see how God is using APRECOM to mobilise a movement of church leaders in different parts of Rwanda to bring children with disability out of isolation and into the heart of their church-life and communities. An informal network of motivated church leaders is beginning to form, gradually spreading across different parts of Rwanda, comprising those with a shared desire to stir the Church in this nation to act and advocate with and on behalf of children with disability. They are being linked together through relationship and shared vision rather than a formal coalition, and by the Holy Spirit.

No society is complete until all its members are valued and able to participate in it and the Church is certainly incomplete whilst children and adults with disability are debarred from being part of it because of barriers of attitude, access and distorted thinking and priorities. Praise God that at last, some of these barriers have begun to be dismantled here in Rwanda through the work of APRECOM and BCT. Let's pray and work on together in his strength until they are completely removed!

.....