



CRWRC

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## **Christian Reformed World Relief Committee**

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Warm greetings from Uganda.

It won't be long before Josephine and I travel to the US again for our biennial deputation, which involves visits to our supporting churches. We are scheduled to be there from December 23 to February 19. Please contact us or the CRWRC office in Grand Rapids if your church or organization would like to schedule us for a presentation on the work CRWRC is doing in Uganda, or if you would like to see us while we are in the States.

CRWRC Uganda is working in partnership with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God – Uganda (PAG). We are working together to increase PAG capacity to carry out holistic ministry throughout Uganda. One of the ways in which we do this is by supporting the establishment of PAG community development offices at the church district (comparable to a CRC classis) level.

At the end of October I had the opportunity to visit one of these new district offices, located in the town of Lira, 75 miles or so north and west of Soroti, where Josephine and I lived until last December. I traveled there with Samuel Ocung, who as the PAG national development coordinator, is my counterpart in this work.

We met the district church leadership at the PAG church. The church and district offices are on a large compound, but much of the compound is occupied with internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been there for several years due to rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacks that began in 2002, when the Ugandan army attacked LRA bases in South Sudan, and the LRA came pouring into Uganda attacking regions now lightly defended. Rebel attacks have diminished over the past year or so, and there have been no attacks in Lira district since April. The Ugandan government is now engaged in peace talks with the rebels. As a result, IDPs are beginning to move home or to camps closer to home.

We drove up the unpaved road about 20 miles in the direction of Kitgum and visited two IDP camps that have existed since 2002. We found that while many people have returned home to plant a few crops and try to rehabilitate their damaged homes, they often stay for only a few days at a time, preferring to maintain their primary residence in the camp, where some relief food is available and where they feel more secure until they are sure that peace has really come and the rebels are no longer rebels. It is hard for us, who have not experienced the terror they endured to appreciate why, when home is so close, and things have been peaceful for months, people still hesitate to go home, even when living conditions in the camps are so appalling.

We stopped at a homestead midway between the two camps, where crops had been planted and it looked like the family had returned. We found only a girl sitting on the front step, nursing her little baby. The girl was very young, was wearing a primary school uniform, and we were told that she had left school while in primary level 6. We were told that the girl had become pregnant while in the camp. It wasn't clear if the father was one of the soldiers

protecting the camp or another camp resident, but it was clear that he was no longer in the picture. The girl had gone home with her parents. What kind of future will this girl and her child have? Are they healthy or infected with HIV? The rate of HIV/AIDS is higher in IDP camps than in the general population in Uganda.

The PAG Lira development office has identified five priority needs for people returning home:

- Replace their means of agricultural production – livestock, oxen, plows, basic farm tools and seed
- Safe and clean water where water sources have been destroyed or degraded
- Orphan care and support
- Knowledge, care and support on HIV/AIDS
- Psychosocial support to those traumatized by war.

Approximately two million people have been directly affected by this war. The needs are overwhelming, and no one organization can meet them all. Out of the five priority areas identified, PAG has decided to focus on support for orphans and vulnerable children. They are asking CRWRC to help with this, and with training for church leaders and church members on how they can respond compassionately and appropriately to those infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS. How do you think CRWRC can best collaborate with PAG in this response?

Jim and Josephine Zylstra