

Link Letter No.16 January 2012

Dear friends,

Christmas morning

8.30am, Christmas morning in Uganda – the sun was shining from a clear blue sky; already hot, the grass and trees around us were turning brown as the dry season progressed, and the seed pods and stony soil crunched hard beneath our feet. After the 15-minute drive from our home in Arua, we were walking up to Kuluva hospital chapel, where Allan had been invited to preach at the combined English-Lugbara morning service at 9am. We found the chapel decorated in the most exuberant style, with a forest of tree branches, foil decorations and balloons festooned around the building. One of the chaplains, standing on the steps of the chapel, welcomed us with a great hug. But by 9.15 we were joined only by the two hospital chaplains, one member of the choir, a lady who would read the lesson, three other adults and two children. Would this service be a big disappointment, despite the elaborate decorations?

We need not have feared. By 10am the service was in full swing (literally, in the case of the music), the chapel was full to bursting with people looking splendid in new clothes, and we were able to rejoice together, old and young, African and *muzungu*, as we celebrated the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. There was singing and dancing, a piece of



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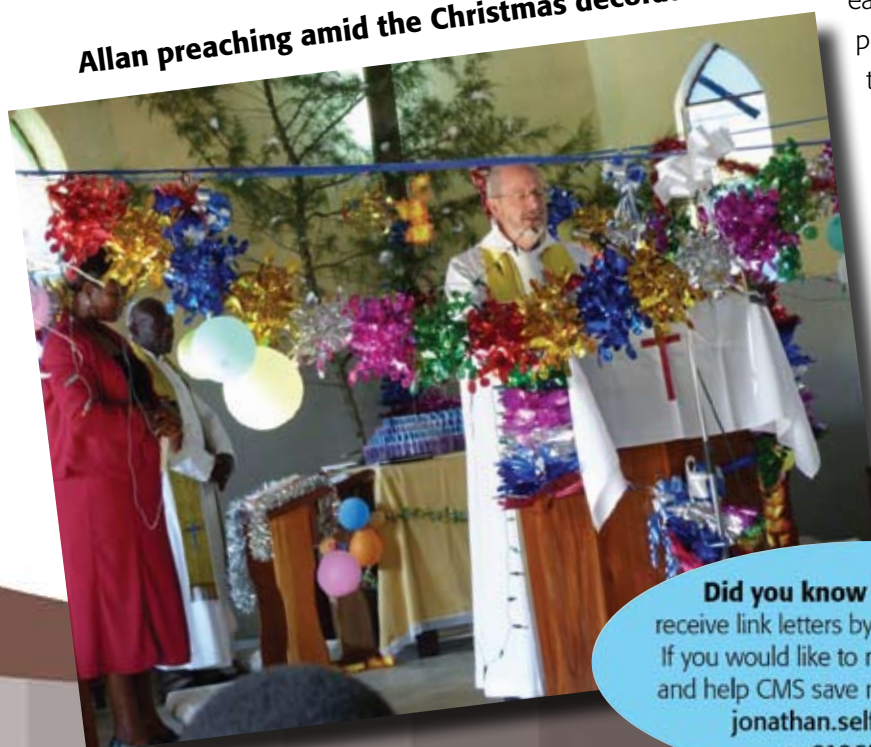
improvised drama from the children, laughter and whoops of joy, and the offertory turned into a general dancing up the aisle with gifts, greeting our friends on the way. This was African worship at its best. All in all, the whole thing lasted until 12.30pm (and Allan's sermon was only 30 minutes, including translation!), and then we had to go and drink a soda with the chaplains before we were allowed to leave. We rushed off finally at 1pm to get our chicken in the oven – our dinner guests were due at 2pm!

The Christmas season

This Christmas period has been light years better than our previous experiences of Ugandan festivities. It started with a cathedral carol service for which we had been able to work on some new carols with the choir, and which included some bizarre but delightful touches (see the blog entry). Then there was a Christmas party at the diocesan office, at which all the staff, from the Diocesan Secretary to the watchmen and tea girl, had a relaxed time together singing carols, playing party games and, of course, eating. Never have we seen a game of musical chairs played (by adults) with such delight and charm, the last two survivors dancing around the one remaining chair with mischievous grace.

Christmas Eve in Arua town is always busy as people buy their Christmas meat and new

Allan preaching amid the Christmas decorations



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Christmas Eve in Arua



Christmas dinner at ours...

clothes, but it's nothing like the commercial bonanza you find in the west. Nevertheless there were VERY long queues at the bank ATM machine, and the odd shop was sporting gaudy Christmas decorations. That evening saw us at an expatriate gathering of 100 or so adults and children at the Catholic diocese HQ, singing carols around a giant Christmas tree in the garden and then feasting on 28 (!!) flavours of ice cream. There are compensations to having a hot climate at Christmas.

Two Christmas dinners

After the Kuluva service on Christmas Day, we were sweating in the kitchen trying to stretch a four-pound chicken to feed seven people – we had expected Cindy (Anne's colleague at the health office) and her husband Sam as our guests, but they turned up with Cindy's brother Daniel as well. Then, at the expatriate gathering the night before, we had come across Nick, a young American we had met a couple of times before, with a visiting girlfriend who had just jetted in from US the day before. Nick confessed that he hadn't made any arrangements for himself and Jory for Christmas Day, so we ended up with seven for dinner. When we got back from church we decided to defrost some sausages and bacon to add to the meat content – no need for microwaves here, just put them in the sun for half an hour and they're ready to cook. We discovered too late that Jory was Jewish and so couldn't eat the pork sausages anyway! But a good time was had by all.

A few days later we had another Christmas dinner, this time attended by our friend Isaac, the Diocesan Secretary, his wife Jessica and our fellow CMS mission partner Francesca Elloway from DR Congo. Isaac and Jessica were intrigued by our English traditions, such as we can make them here, and most of all by the crackers we had managed to find in Kampala – they were disproportionately excited by the 'crack' as we pulled them, by the jokes and plastic gifts inside, and they donned the party hats with great glee. Simple pleasures have not yet palled here.

Attending a funeral

On December 30 we attended the sort of event that would have made no sense at all to us before we came here over four years ago. Even now we struggle to comprehend it. The previous bishop of this diocese, who retired in 2005, died in the US a couple of weeks before Christmas. Despite the fact that he had lived most of his life in USA (though he was born and brought up here), and all except one of his nine children lived there, he had insisted before death that his body must be buried at the cathedral here. So, seemingly facilitated by the government of Uganda, the body was flown back for the funeral here two weeks after the death.

It was a huge event, with bishops and others coming from all over Uganda, not to mention most of the pastors and church leaders from our diocese, a minister of state and other MPs, and the Vice-President of Uganda. About 20 members of the family came from USA, some of whom had never been to Uganda before and all of whom spoke fluent American rather than Lugbara. The military police were there in force, as were various bodyguards for the Vice-President. At the end of the five hour ceremony the body, in an elaborate casket, was buried behind the cathedral in a massive grave lined with cement and tiles.

Many of the speeches (the speeches lasted for three hours, the funeral service itself for less than two) had nothing at all to do with him, but were an opportunity for various political persons to get on their favourite soapbox.

Generally, however, we were glad that we had been involved (Allan even had to read a lesson), and Bishop Joel afterwards thanked us warmly for 'standing with' the diocese during the event, which he obviously felt could have been very difficult.



Christmas Day at Kuluva chapel



Queues at the bank during Christmas

New Year's Eve

On New Year's Eve we attended a joyful gathering outside the cathedral to celebrate the passing of the old and to welcome the New Year. There was music and dancing, speeches (mercifully short), and even fireworks when we got to midnight. It felt good to celebrate with several hundred others (although it was pretty dark and we couldn't really see who was there). The bishop caught the mood and spoke with inspiration of the need to grasp the future, speak out about injustices and corruption, and expect God to do great things. He declared 2012 to be a 'Year of Jubilee' as Uganda celebrates 50 years of independence, he and his wife 25 years of marriage, and the seventh year of his episcopacy. We danced the night away (well, until 1am anyway!).

Financial cutbacks...

So we return to the more mundane things of life. The financial crisis in the west is having its own impact here. Exchange rates have been somewhat volatile, ensuring prices for imported goods here are very high. Western donor governments are also seriously cutting back on aid, upon which much of Ugandan healthcare, road building and education depend. From our point of view the crisis has disrupted a major project to construct the first of three Diocesan Language and Training Centres, where it was hoped translation work could be established in each of the main languages of the diocese, as well as providing modern training facilities for church leaders. The funding, seemingly a definite commitment made personally to Bishop Joel from an individual donor in UK last year, is now looking very uncertain.

Africans often take these things with a more relaxed attitude than we do. The project had been announced, the land identified, and plans were beginning to be developed, but now it might all grind

to a halt until alternative funding can be found. We feel a bit cheated, that poor people here are paying the price of western excesses. But our African colleagues, maybe more used to disappointment than we are, remain full of faith that somehow it will happen... one day. But a smaller scale project is going ahead, to expand the Reprographics Unit into a next door room to provide a Diocesan Resource Centre selling Bibles, liturgy and hymn books, and locally produced resource materials at affordable prices. It is hoped that it can also become a meeting place where pastors and others can get some refreshment, have a chat, and borrow books from a small theological library while they are visiting the diocesan HQ. This project has been generously funded by a friend and supporter, and it will make a big difference.

Allan's work...

Allan continues to write *Lectionary Link* materials to support

Children in their new clothes for Christmas



preaching Sunday by Sunday. A small evaluation study showed it was being very much appreciated and making a real improvement to preaching and teaching. Some problems remain with translation and distribution, but more translators are being trained and systems improved. Hopefully the full three-year lectionary will have been completed later this year, and revision can then take place to make it a sustainable resource for the diocese.

Allan is hoping to address some pastoral issues such as bereavement this year through workshops with clergy, but has also been asked to get much more involved at the cathedral, to improve worship there in its broadest sense and enable it to become something of a centre of excellence. He will be working with Fanuel, the Provost there, who is a good friend and a man who wants things to change.

Anne's work...

Anne has now formally handed over her role as Diocesan Health Coordinator to Cindy, and become Health Advisor instead, which is a rather more flexible role. She will still help Cindy with overseeing the health centres and Kuluva Hospital, but hopes to be able to take a wider view of health in the diocese. She is also getting more involved with management at the School of Nursing, being academic tutor to the new Diploma in Nursing there. That started in November with 11 students who are already trained nurses or midwives, but are now upgrading to Diploma status. It's good to be able to teach a group of 11 mature students instead of the usual 50-60 straight from school!

Kuluva Hospital is beginning to emerge from the worst of the management problems there, but has lost a lot of senior staff. Around 30 new staff have been recruited who all started at the beginning of January – some chaos has ensued, but we pray that things will now begin to normalise again.

At home we have enjoyed a succession of visitors in our annexe, which has been fun, and we have made several new friendships. Our next visitors will be our daughter Jo and husband John – they are arriving on 14 January at Entebbe, and we are then going off exploring new bits of Uganda with them, notably Kidepo National Park in the far NE. Then we will bring them back here for a week or so to meet our friends and colleagues and sample the

tourist delights of Arua (!) before they leave at the beginning of February. We are planning an unscheduled trip back to the UK in October – Ben and Bethan tell us that we are expecting to be grandparents, which delights us although it makes us feel a bit old! The baby is due in June, which will be very exciting. We will be sorry to miss much of the first couple of years, but are very happy that Skype now works well from here, including video.

Prayer requests

- For the country of Uganda, its government and people. Inflation is running at around 30%, the currency has been unstable during 2011, and many people are struggling to make a living. There have been some public protests. Corruption remains a serious problem, and overseas aid is reducing. Population growth is one of the highest in the world
- For the Diocesan Language and Training Centre project – that the donor may be able to fulfil his promise, or that alternative plans can meet this need.
- For the expansion of the Reprographics Unit into a Diocesan Resources Centre, that work may proceed quickly and the Centre become an asset in the life of the diocese, as the Reprographics Unit itself has.
- For Allan's new role at the cathedral, Anne's new role in the diocese, and for Cindy and Gift who are both taking over responsibilities from us.
- For Kuluva Hospital and the School of Nursing, that they may be rehabilitated after the problems of the last year and become again a good witness to the light of Christ.
- As ever, for good health and safe travelling for us. Anne experienced our first bout of malaria in November last year, but recovered quickly and fully within a few days on treatment, for which we were very grateful.

We send our Christian greetings and prayers for you for all that God wants to bless you with in 2012

Anne and Allan