

Companion Links. Swaziland: Challenges Continue...but there are Bright Spots too.

It's true to say that, on all my visits to Swaziland, visits to Neighbourhood Care Points have been tough.

Sometimes it's tough just getting there, on long drives over mud roads in deeply rural areas. Always it's tough when I do get there and am confronted every time with the daily struggles for survival faced by our Swazi companions.

Some areas are worse than others and those living in the drought areas have a particularly difficult time.

In one rural area I visited, almost every homestead seemed to be empty and falling into disrepair.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic has wiped out the lives of so many families and small communities: it has contributed to extreme poverty and left fear and anxiety in the homes and hearts of the adults and children who are left. Many of those left are women - often elderly grandmothers, left to care for orphaned grandchildren.

These determined grandmothers are trying to provide for anything up to ten dependent children, which is clearly an impossible task, particularly when most of them have no income and no means of earning money.

Swaziland is still a largely rural country with agricultural traditions, and subsistence farming has been the way of life for many, many generations. Traditionally, Swazi families live in small scattered, rural communities overseen by a local chief. They farm small plots of land around their homesteads and provide most of their family's food from their own small farm or vegetable garden.

Many families used to have some additional income earned outside the home, which was used to pay for school fees, seeds, tools and other essentials, but the level of unemployment in Swaziland is currently around 70% and those in rural areas have little chance of finding local work.

With the droughts of recent years and increasing illness among families and communities, fewer families are able to look after the land and grow food. As a result, the enamel basins in which they store their crops, are often empty. Where there is no food, families are sometimes driven to eat the seeds that should be saved for sowing the next crop.

When I last visited Swaziland, in November 2012, the women volunteers, at several diocesan Neighbourhood Care Points (NCPs), told us sadly that the only food the children eat is either at school, where a lunchtime meal may be provided, or at the NCP where the volunteer caregivers will cook a lunchtime meal for those children who do not eat at school, who are too young to attend school or who don't have the means to go to school

In the past two years, food deliveries to the diocesan NCPs have been sparse and, as a result, many NCPs have been unable to cook regularly for the children.

There is often no food at home to give the children for breakfast before they leave to walk to school and nothing for them when they get home at night.

I hear of children walking a long way to get to their NCP, in the hope of a meal, only to be turned away hungry because there is nothing for them.

The schools have recently been on their winter holiday. NCPs often close during the school holidays to give the volunteers a break, but this year several closed early, because they had no food supplies left and could not cook for the children.

Weekends are often very difficult times, when communities - adults and children- may gather around a cooking fire, but have nothing to cook.

In these very difficult circumstances, our companions in the Anglican Diocese of Swaziland are working hard to find ways to address the many and complex difficulties they face.

Despite all of the challenges, the people remain optimistic, strong in their faith that God will help them and genuinely pleased to welcome us.

In the past month, basic food supplies have been delivered to all 14 NCPs by the staff from the diocesan HIV/AIDS Office in Mbabane. This was made possible by a very generous donation from our companions in Iowa.

These funds also enabled the purchase of medicines and personal care items for the Home Based Care (HBC) teams, who look after terminally ill people who are left at home with little or no medical or family support and enabled the HIV/AIDS Office staff to buy petrol, to make visits and deliver the food and medical supplies.

So for a little while, the situation has eased and around 700 children will be fed at the start of the new school term.

Brechin is a small diocese and we cannot provide large donations, but we continue to work hard to 'make a difference' in many smaller but no less worthwhile ways.

It was Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu who said:

'Never be afraid of doing the small thing. It is all the small things together that change the world.'

If we are the diocese of doing '*small things*', then it's important that we continue to do each small thing well. I know from first hand experience that our efforts do make a significant and positive difference.

Swaziland needs us to be true companions - to share their journey however we can.

In my next report, I'd like to share a bit more about the NCPs and about how our interventions have helped make a difference to the lives of some of our companions in Swaziland.

Pat Millar

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16th June 2013.

