

Swaziland: it's Good to Share a Happy Story

I first visited Swaziland in the autumn of 2007, with a group of seven from our diocese. We travelled all over the Diocese of Swaziland, visiting many of the parishes and meeting those offering mainly voluntary support to diocesan-led projects for orphans and vulnerable children and for those sick at home with little or no medical support. It was a sobering introduction to the harsh realities of life for the poor in sub-Saharan Africa and I think it's true to say that we were all changed by the experience.

On one visit, Canon Orma Magalula took us to her parish centre at St Mathias, where I had my first meeting with the Ezulwini parish women's group. These are women whose lives have been affected by HIV and AIDS. Some are widowed, some are single mothers abandoned by husbands, some have lost children and other close family members to AIDS related illnesses, some are sick themselves and some are grandmothers bringing up orphaned grandchildren, nieces and nephews. The women face immense challenges in their daily lives and draw support and encouragement from each other, their parish priest and their faith. The **Ezulwini Women's Group**, as they are now known, have become a focal point for my time in Swaziland each time I go.

At the time of that first visit, the ladies were knitting and crocheting, hoping to sell some of the items. They had been making the same things repeatedly for a long time and I wondered if they might enjoy making some different, simple things, which might sell at the market.

When I went back a year later, in 2008, I was there on my own and arranged to spend more time with this group. I suggested that we might try some sewing together and they were keen to have a go. Some had sewn before, while others had never used a needle and thread. We got the one available sewing machine repaired – after a fashion – and I bought lots of bright cotton fabrics in Manzini. During that visit, I led several workshops, where the ladies were introduced to cutting out and sewing simple patchwork.



We got to know each other as we worked – learning new skills, drinking Roibus tea and having a good time.

I taught the most competent needlewomen and then they, in turn, taught the others. That way, the ownership of the activities stayed with them and strengthened the group dynamic. That was important since I was going to leave.

They may have learned something about sewing from me, but I learned so much more about optimism, perseverance, acceptance and faith from them. They have so many problems and yet they are resilient and inspirational women.



With minimal resources, the workshops were always challenging, but good humour and ingenuity were there aplenty. We 'borrowed' some long pieces of wood from a joiner and they became our straight edge rulers. With no work tables, church benches became cutting out surfaces for those who were not supple enough to work on the floor.



I had taken with me a range of very basic sewing resources, but there was a limit to what I had been able to carry and what the airline baggage allowance would permit. (On that trip I had already committed to take 300 stainless steel spoons for the children fed at the care points).

In these early workshops, we made simple 'log cabin' patchwork blocks for floor cushions – useful when there is no seating at home; polished cow dung floors are hard. We also made 'blessings birds' – simple stitched birds, which were stuffed and a hand-written blessing or prayer, written by the ladies, was placed inside each bird before it was stitched closed. These were quick to make and very popular.



The group requested more workshops when I went back in 2010, again on my own, and so we have carried on working together during my visits, talking, listening, drinking tea, sharing stories of home life, parish life, hopes, worries and faith, and sewing together to make simple items that cost little to make and might sell. Throughout, I have been aware that aiming for some degree of self sufficiency had to be a priority.

Since 2007, the group has been supported with small but fairly regular donations from funds collected in Brechin Diocese, to help with the purchase of resources for sewing and other income generating activities. (They also make green Sunlight washing soap – good for doing laundry in cold water and also a Vaseline type ointment that is popular for general skin care).

During 2011, our diocese was able to support the group when some of the ladies were given the opportunity to extend their growing interest and skills by attending an official sewing course, accredited by the Swazi Government and taught by a well qualified and able young teacher. This was a real turning point.

Eighteen of the younger women in the group were sponsored to attend – eyesight was a key factor in deciding who should go. With no means of getting to an optician or paying for glasses, several of the older women could not see clearly enough for the close sewing work required.

Resources continued to be a problem and so, when I knew I was going back to Swaziland in November 2012, I put out a call, around the diocese and among family and quilting friends, for sewing resources – new or in very good condition. The response was extremely generous and Bishop Nigel, Anne and I all carried large parcels of sewing goods in our luggage. I delivered everything to St Mathias Church hall on a day when the sewing class was in session and was delighted to be invited to stay and share in what they were doing.

The teacher was pleased to show off the group's progress and with good reason. The work they were doing was amazing. That day, they were all working on the yoke and collar of a man's tailored shirt – very complex, but they were confident, focused and very satisfied with their achievements. To say that they were thrilled with their new sewing supplies is such an understatement. The goods were shared out among the group there and then : the teacher and I agreed that they would take better care of them if they each owned their own share.



At the end of the course, we sent some funds to help mark their achievement and a small graduation celebration was arranged, organised by the graduates themselves with the help of Canon Orma. A guest list was drawn up and invitations sent out. The Government Permanent Secretary, a lady, attended along with members of clergy and the local council; a representative of the area chief was there and of course family and friends of the group. It was I'm told a wonderful and joyful event.

The group put on a fashion show of the clothing they had made, there was music - and dancing of course – certificates were given out, there were speeches and, very importantly in a Swazi celebration, there was traditional food.

The Permanent Secretary was apparently so impressed that she promised to help fund and support the introduction of a similar course in other parishes. The Diocese of Swaziland has agreed to support this initiative and Canon Orma will act as a facilitator. Maybe we will be able to help too.

As for self sufficiency, I am told that one of the church schools has asked the group to undertake an order for school uniforms. Some of the ladies are ready to work co-operatively on this and some others plan to undertake individual orders for dressmaking and alterations.

We have helped to make a difference.

My thanks to everyone.

Pat
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