

Bishop Martin Seeley writes in Bury Free Press (July 2023)...

I am writing this from north-west Tanzania in Africa, where I am visiting churches, schools and community projects in the region of Kagera with which our Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich has had a connection for nearly thirty years.

I and a colleague have spent today travelling along the western shore of Lake Victoria, an extraordinarily beautiful part of this country, looking out over the largest lake in Africa. We even managed a walk along a sandy beach, in the hot sunshine, at Bukoba, the capital city of the region. The beauty belies the poverty, particularly in the countryside where the great majority of the population exist on what they can produce themselves in a subsistence economy. And subsistence doesn't mean dependence. What we saw today, and on the previous ten days of our visit, has been entrepreneurship and enterprise in a determination towards self-sufficiency.

We have visited three Anglican dioceses and in each one there are projects helping churches develop farming methods that will generate income as well as provide for themselves and their communities. Those projects include tree nurseries, growing trees from seed, to be planted in communities to produce income from timber, and while it is five-ten years before a tree can be profitably felled, once the process is under way, that becomes a continuous source of income.

Today we saw a church that the congregation is literally building themselves. They have outgrown their present building – itself the third – and now they are building the fourth on the site, to accommodate more than a thousand people. They have bought or been donated the bricks, sand and cement and members of the congregation are laying the bricks, making the concrete, constructing the concrete reinforcements for the structure. They have nearly completed the walls – just six more courses of bricks to lay on top of a concrete lintel running round the four sides of the building. The challenge is the roof, for which the cost will be about £2,000, for the timbers and the corrugated iron sheets.

The relationship we have with these dioceses is based on prayer and friendship, mutual learning and support.

This is my second visit, and each visit I learn a huge amount, to renew and strengthen me in my ministry serving the people of Suffolk. For many of our churches in Suffolk what I have seen in Tanzania is familiar. A determination to serve others, through ingenuity, creativity and entrepreneurship.

That lies behind the growth of food banks and top up shops, behind the range of programmes of care and support local churches provide across our county, rooted in the understanding that we exist to show and share God's love practically, as well as through sharing the convictions of our faith. And that care and support for people in Suffolk extends to expressing practical support to our friends in north-west Tanzania, through the nearly three decades of this connection.

So in the Diocese of Kagera last week I unveiled a plaque at the Ngara Anglican Primary School giving thanks for contributions from Suffolk towards a range of buildings that have enable the school to grow and strengthen its care and education of now 550 children. At the local hospital, run by the Church, I was shown a new blood analyser, which cuts the time for blood tests to two minutes, again which people from Suffolk churches had paid for. And at another village I turned on a tap from a new water tank, capturing the seasonal rainfall, to provide the vicarage, the church and their neighbours with water. Before the tank was built, paid for by Suffolk church contributions, people had to walk nearly four miles to fetch water.

In the complexities of our global economy, these life changing interventions are beyond the financial reach of the communities here, but, in comparison, relatively modest cost for us. The water tank cost about £800; a new motorbike for a vicar to travel between their many churches, about the same amount; a new toilet block for the primary school will cost £2,000, the same as a roof for a new church; £200 a year pays for a family's health insurance; £3 per month supports a minister in training at theological college in Kagera.

This is an important part of our relationship with Kagera, but the relationship is genuinely mutual, and the financial contributions are just one part. As I told a gathering of clergy and church members here, we receive so much from them.

Their hope, faith, joy, laughter and encouragement are immense gifts to those of us who visit.

As their bishop, Bishop Darlington, put it, "*The church exists to go outwards, it belongs to the community.*" He was quite clear that the social outreach is undertaken for its own sake, "to show God's love." It also, he said, introduces people to what the church is for and so for some, maybe just a few, it is a route into discovering faith - which would not happen if the outreach and service was not there.

I hope this may even sound a little bit familiar. My hope for the Church in Suffolk has been, since I arrived, that we make a difference for good in every community we are part of, in practical care as well as worship, and prayer.