

A Swiss Benedictine in the Prisons of Nairobi

By Isaiah Esipisu (THE NATION)

Silence loomed in the court room. The audience held its breath. Many fought back tears. But the judge looked at her, direct in the face. And finally, the verdict was announced, a death sentence. That was back in January 2003.

But four years down the line she is proudly pursuing a diploma course in Food and Beverage Management, in one of the senior-most colleges in Kenya.

Her heart was bleeding with pain. She trembled like a leaf. Longing and pondering for an angel of God to come down and save her from the hangman's noose. She knew well that she was innocent.

The grief of her diseased child kept haunting her. But later that afternoon, she joined fellow inmates at the Lang'ata Women's Prison's condemned section. She mingled with murderers, bank robbers among many other hardcore criminals on the death row. They became her foster sisters, bedmates and the closest friends. She always prayed to the God who released the biblical Daniel from jail, to come down to her rescue.

Agnes, (not her real name) had been condemned to death for allegedly murdering her eight year old step daughter in April 2001.

However, deep in her heart, there was a different story. The little angel fell sick, and she innocently administered anti-malarial drugs in overdose. This worsened the kid's health condition, which resulted to her sudden death on that ill-fated chilly evening.

After her sentence, she went ahead and applied for an appeal in the same month, of which the hearing was granted on March 27, 2006.

On the fifth day of May last year, the court of appeal paid full attention to her case and found her not guilty. For four years the innocent young lady had served as a condemned prisoner. Living without any hope for the future, bitter about her present life, and regretting why she was born. She was miserable and mentally tortured.

Her body had malnourished due to the poor diet of boiled full leaves of *sukuma wiki*, white porridge, boiled rice and beans on a daily basis. She was scratching all over her body due to the parasites which feed on her due to poor hygiene among the inmates. Life had totally become unbearable for her.

She resented such a society and was not ready to forgive. She had given up in life and found no perfect friends in the society. Until months thereafter, when she met Fr. Peter Meienberg, a Swiss Benedictine Missionary.

She had met him at the prison at regular intervals, since he was, and still is the prison's chaplain.

After some counseling he enrolled her to a college where he paid her college fees for the entire training. The 27 year old lady, now a mother of two, does not want to share her experiences with the public anymore.

"She is still recovering and needs time and counseling to fully accept the society," says the priest. She refused to disclose herself to the public for personal reasons. "I am tired of being covered in the media," she said. The Daily Nation covered her story twice immediately after she was condemned to death.

The Swiss missionary has a big heart for such people, including the dependants of the imprisoned, those who have been released from remand prison for not being guilty, and the imprisoned.

He says, "There is no greater satisfaction than accompanying someone who had no hope in life, recollect herself, and confidently begin a new positive life."

Apart from Agnes, Fr. Meienberg has over 100 students whom he is paying school fees for in high schools, colleges and universities through Faraja Trust, which he initiated seven years ago. Some are dependants of the imprisoned, others are ex-prisoners either from jail or remand prisons; the majority of recipients however are needy Kenyans and refugees from the francophone countries of the Great Lakes' Region.

Since 1999, when he joined LWP as the chaplain, he is in the process of face-lifting its outlook in an effort to make it a proper rehabilitation center. He believes that the journey to a just society has to begin from decently rehabilitating the so called unjust.

"First, we give all the credit to the government for spearheading prison reform program through the office of the Vice President, and allowing other players to participate in the effort of making it a rehabilitation centre instead of a punishing centre," says Grace Odhiambo, the officer in charge, LWP.

"Through such efforts, LWP is now embracing the Information Technology (IT) world through computers donated to it by Faraja Trust. Many people out there cannot afford this technology, yet they need it. But at LWP, we are lucky because both the prison wardresses and the prisoners can now access it free of charge," she adds.

The missionary has donated ten computers to LWP, ten to the Youth Correction Training Center in Kamiti and three to the Industrial Area Men's Prisons in

Nairobi. He has employed teachers to see through the computer students who are prisoners.

“We have now embarked on the physical renovation process of our prisons of interest, of which we have paid a lot of attention to the LWP,” says Fr. Meienberg.

The Trust is improving the window system from the traditional prison windows, which are little openings at the top end of the wall, to normal windows for proper ventilation and lighting in the rooms.

He says, “We have reinforced them with steel metal bars and wire mesh to the satisfaction of the prisons’ officials.” He adds, “The inmates are just normal human beings like anybody else, and if given a proper rehabilitative environment, they can become very normal people with positive minds in the society.”

The prisoners are also enjoying their neatly re-painted rooms. On special occasions they receive bread and milk donated to them by Faraja Trust.

As a next step a sports ground is going to be constructed to allow prisoners to release stress through games, while a new building will go up to accommodate sewing and knitting machines, computers, a library and three counseling rooms.

“We are so appreciative to the efforts of Faraja Trust. These facilities will definitely reduce the time inmates, especially in remand prisons, spend indoors from 22 hour per day to lesser hours. This will give their minds room for positive thinking,” says Odhiambo, the Officer in Charge.

However, going with a recent statement from the Chief Justice, Evans Gicheru during a recent televised interview, he said, “The cost of justice in Kenya is just too high, and thus totally unaffordable by the poor.”

This means that most people who cannot afford the cost of proper representation by an advocate in courts may end up in jail unjustly. “Agnes, for example, was going to serve a death sentence, if at all she didn’t get a lawyer to represent her in the court of appeal,” says Fr. Meienberg.

As a result, Faraja Trust has petitioned a group of lawyers to represent the disadvantaged lot in the society, including appeals for those already jailed. The lawyers therefore refer back to testimonies by inmates already sentenced, and determine which cases need an appeal, of which they offer free of charge to the prisoner.

“So far, our biggest achievement was when we managed to reduce a sentence of one of the inmates in LWP from the death row to two years imprisonment,” says the missionary. “We are also looking forward to the time by doing political

lobbying to change the Prison Act, so that detainees from the remand prisons who are proven guilty will have the number of days spent in the remand prison deducted from the sentence given during the judgment,” he adds.

To finance his charitable activities, the missionary is being assisted by his friends and relatives overseas. To supplement these funds, he created some income-generating projects by building apartments both in South B and in Westlands, the rent of which goes fully into his ministries. Most of these apartments are rented by rich embassy officials and managers of NGOs who can afford paying for expensive flats.

Unlike the majority of clergymen in Kenya, Fr. Meienberg does not earn from his congregations. Instead, he donates towards their welfare. “Whatever I have, has been given to me by the Lord, and therefore such gifts have to serve his people,” says the 77 year old clergyman.

All the cash earned from these properties is earmarked to serving the poor through Faraja Trust, especially those in prison and their dependants, ex-prisoners, Kenyan orphans and refugees.

Over the years the Trust has bought 50 acres of land in Isenya, on which a school is being built for the benefit of needy young people who will reside there and will be trained in modern methods of agriculture and husbandry. In order to finance this new project, vegetables and herbs will be sold to the city markets, and a tree called *Jatropha* is being planted to produce crude oil for local consumption.

Fr. Meienberg has been very active in helping refugees over the last 30 years. In the 70s, he supported refugees from Uganda, in 80s those from Sudan and Ethiopia, and in the 90s from the Great Lakes’ Region.

He initially started the project as a first aid project at the time of arrival of the refugees who were provided with blankets, mattresses, cooking utensils and at times, accommodation.

However, the project soon expanded into a more structured assistance by accepting students for lessons in English, computer and tailoring in his own school put up in Kasarani, in collaboration with the Little Sisters of St. Francis. Today it involves provision for education to young people through scholarships at secondary and post secondary levels.

In 1999, Faraja added to its work the prison ministry in three different prisons in Nairobi. These are the Industrial Area Remand, Kamiti and LWP where the Trust is most active.

Fr. Meienberg began as a visiting chaplain to these prisons by celebrating religious services, but now his ministry has expanded into assisting in social, legal and economic affairs.

“My mission in Kenya is a calling. I will serve the people of God with all my heart, spiritually, socially and economically. God will always grant me the necessary energy to continue with what I am doing,” says Fr. Meienberg.