Mbikko Integrated Development
Fighting AIDS and poverty with education
— Mbikko, Uganda —

“My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words...
For they are life to those who find them and health to a man’s whole body.”
Proverbs 4:20-22
Project Synopsis

Description
Provide community-based health and AIDS-prevention training, adult literacy classes, youth life skills education and a widow’s support group.

Purpose
Increase awareness among Uganda’s poor about health issues so they live long and healthy lives; help poor, illiterate adults improve their lives through literacy; encourage moral behavior among children and young adults; and help widows learn income-generating skills so they can support themselves and their children.

Location
Mbikko, Uganda

Cost
$38,500, or just $3,208 a month.

Project Highlights
- Uganda is struggling to overcome a violent past — from its independence in 1962 until the late 1980s, people suffered the bloody effects of guerilla warfare and human rights abuses by political parties.
- Though Uganda is relatively stable today in a political sense, a decades-long war still rages all over the country at the household level: the battle against AIDS.
- AIDS has claimed millions of lives in Uganda, and about 1.2 million Ugandans are living with the disease today.
- Life in Uganda’s slums perpetuates illnesses of all kinds — AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria — due to poor sanitation, risky lifestyles and lack of adequate health care facilities.
- The Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa began working in the slums of Mbikko in 1997, fighting the battle against AIDS with health and AIDS-prevention training.
- The sisters realize that in addition to health education, the poor need literacy and income-generating skills to lift themselves out of poverty and avoid situations where AIDS and other poverty-related illnesses are spread.
- The sisters also believe preventing AIDS begins with changing behavior, so they offer “Education for Life” classes for children, young adults, and adults that teach responsible and moral living to avoid AIDS and overcome poverty.
- Cross Catholic Outreach is committed to supporting the holistic development projects operated by the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa in Mbikko, Uganda.
The Need

When the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa came to Mbikko, Uganda, in 1997, they found an abundance of medical facilities — including two hospitals and many small dispensaries and clinics — but an absence of trained staff. The quality of pre- and post-natal care was abysmal, and bad hygiene practices and poor sanitation in the slums were an open invitation to disease.

Social life in the slums was no healthier. Young people were ignoring the dangers of premarital sex in an AIDS-ridden society, fathers were routinely abandoning their wives and children, and lingering African traditional religious beliefs were permeating everyday life. Superstition and curses influence understanding about everything from death to how diseases are spread. And when it comes to diseases, the deadliest and most prevalent one in Mbikko’s slums is AIDS, which has left countless orphans behind as walking memorials to its destructive power.

On top of that, children were being deprived of the basic education they needed to escape the poverty of the slums. Though public education is free in Uganda, the reality is that few public schools exist, and those that are available are extremely overcrowded. The only other option parents have is to send their child to a private school, but for the poor in the slums who can barely afford to eat, the expenses of private school are beyond their reach.

Faced with this overwhelming life, the poor in Mbikko’s slums initially weren’t interested in the sisters’ plan for a health education program, despite heavy promotion through village gatherings, youth groups and house visits. Wherever they went, their message received polite smiles but little more.

Rather than get discouraged, the sisters learned what the people did want — literacy and skills training — and used this need as an open door to the community’s heart and mind and a way to promote healthy living through education.

You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light.

2 Samuel 22:29
Project Description

The sisters’ collective ministry is called Mbikko Integrated Development. Their outreach work, done through a committed team of lay Catholics, consists of four parts: community-based health and AIDS-prevention training, adult literacy classes, youth life skills education and a widow’s support group. Each portion complements the other and works to help families as a whole — children, adolescents, parents, widows and the elderly.

**Health and AIDS-Prevention Training**

Health education was the first outreach program the sisters offered when they arrived, and they continue to offer this beneficial training. Trained health workers who are part of Mbikko Integrated Development go into needy communities and promote awareness about health topics such as hygiene, sanitation, immunization, pre- and post-natal care, nutrition and how to avoid diseases like AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.

The purpose of the outreach is to help the poor make more informed health decisions on a daily basis. They discover that how they treat their bodies eventually impacts their families and communities. Living an unhealthy lifestyle can prevent parents from being able to care for their children, or even cause premature death. The community suffers when parents die because others, who are also poor, must take on extra burdens to care for orphaned children.

The health workers promote AIDS-prevention within the context of Christ’s teachings. Bible-based values, such as abstinence and faithfulness in marriage, are an integral part of the health education they offer. In a culture where witch doctors and other elements of African traditional religion linger, the faith-based part of the training is one of the most important messages.

*Armed with health training, young mothers living in the slums understand how to keep themselves and their babies healthy.*
Literacy Classes

Many adults in Uganda grew up during a dark period in the country’s history — from its independence in 1962 until the late 1980s, people suffered the effects of violent guerilla warfare, economic chaos and human rights abuses by political leaders. With the country in turmoil, schools struggled to stay open and violence led many parents to keep their children at home.

As a result, many Ugandan adults never had the opportunity to learn to read, and today they are suffering the economic consequences of not having the literacy skills to even sign their name on a document, let alone earn a living wage. The paralyzing shame of illiteracy leads many Ugandans to keep their problem a secret even as their communities experience economic stagnation and despair.

To meet this crucial need, the Integrated Development team developed the Functional Adult Literacy Project. This adult literacy course attracts eager men and women of all ages, whose newfound skills increase their chances of finding jobs or initiating their own income-generating activities, from poultry farming to tailoring. The classes meet three times per week and have three levels: Primer 1, Primer 2, and an English class, so adults can learn the official language of Uganda.

The sisters continue to be amazed by the transformative power of learning to read. It gives the poor the self-confidence to become contributing members of their community, and some are even elected to local political positions. Literacy opens up a new world — they can read the newspaper, read letters from their children’s schools and get loans to run a small business.

As a bonus, the class curriculum incorporates texts on health, hygiene, AIDS prevention and economics. Many of the literacy students go on to receive health care training and become community health care workers. Thanks to the literacy course, the people now understand the need to learn about nutrition, sanitation, immunization and other health concerns that had long been neglected.

Adult students say literacy opens up a whole new world of knowledge.
Behavior Formation

AIDS-prevention starts with changing the behaviors that lead to infection. In the slums where people live in close quarters and suffering abounds, children form their ideas about sex, marriage, drugs and alcohol at an early age — and under the circumstances they usually don’t form a morally-minded outlook.

The sisters saw that young people, especially girls, were becoming sexually active outside of marriage at an early age, and the amount of misinformation circulating among them about health topics was extreme. To combat the spread of AIDS and help young people live moral and healthy lives, the Integrated Development team started the Education for Life Project, an outreach program to students in local schools.

Program facilitators as well as a counselor go into local public and private schools and talk to students about the moral way to approach everyday topics: premarital sex, AIDS, drugs and alcohol, family life, marriage, treatment of children and respecting elders. They tailor the programs for the different age groups they speak to, with children ranging in age from 8 to 17. As with all of the Mbikko Integrated Development programs, the Education for Life Project incorporates Christ’s teachings and provides a spiritual foundation for a moral and healthy life.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.

Psalm 86:11
Skills Training for Widows

Not to leave out any segment of society, the ministry also offers a support group for poor widows, many of whom lost their spouses to AIDS or must care for grandchildren whose parents died of AIDS. The plight of widows is particularly devastating in Uganda, because a wife loses her property to her in-laws if her husband dies.

Even worse, African traditional religion still lingers among many people, and a common false belief is that husbands only die if their wives curse them or kill them. Widows are routinely shunned from society because of this misinformation, further derailing their attempts to support themselves and their children all alone. Sometimes they are even physically attacked or murdered.

Lay leaders facilitate a special support group for about 80 widows in Mbikko twice a week. The women receive skills training and learn income-generating activities like mat making, basket weaving, jewelry making and sewing. Through the support group, these women share skills, encourage one another, participate in a small business loan program and ultimately achieve self-sufficiency. They are encouraged to attend the ministry’s other outreach programs, such as the health training and literacy classes, and they also receive counseling and AIDS-prevention education.

One of the greatest gifts widows receive through the support group is self-confidence. These marginalized women regain the self-assurance they had when their husbands were alive, and they realize they have the power to change their life situation when they put their skills to use and learn to trust God. They know they have the strength to care for themselves and their children on their own, thanks to the loving support and Christ-like care of the Integrated Development team.

Widows learn income-generating skills, such as sewing and jewelry making.
Help Now!

The darkness of illiteracy; the threat of AIDS; the suffering caused by inadequate health care; the marginalization of defenseless widows — these are the realities of everyday life in Mbikko’s slums. To meet the health, literacy and spiritual needs of Uganda’s poor, the sisters must maintain an adequate staff. They depend on Cross Catholic Outreach to pay the salaries of the project coordinator, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of all four programs, and also of four Education for Life facilitators/teachers. In addition, they need to pay a part-time driver to transport the staff.

Without the dedication of competent workers, the sisters’ vision could not be realized: widows would be left to fend for themselves, children would get their sex education on the streets, adults would remain illiterate, and preventable disease would continue to spread without health education. But with your support, it doesn’t have to be that way.

Whenever work is being done by Catholics in the name of the poor, Christ is there. Whenever Catholics in America are reaching out to members of the church overseas, Christ is there also. As one body in Christ, let us answer the cries of the poorest of the poor living in Mbikko’s slums. Won’t you join us?

But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.

1 Samuel 12:24

Proceeds from this campaign will be used to cover any expenditures for this project incurred during the current calendar year. In the event that more funds are raised than needed to fully fund the project, the excess funds, if any, will be used to meet the most urgent needs of the ministry.