

MARCH 2019

Kome Island community health project – Mama's groups

Victoria Ewing writes about the work that they are doing amongst the mamas on Kome Island. This is just one aspect of their work there, and a future article will look at the sanitation work in the island community.

Kome Island, on the southern part of Lake Victoria, has a population of approximately 60,000 people. The majority of the population are subsistence farmers or fishers. The island has no paved roads and no running water. Electricity is available for the select few who can afford it. Emmanuel International (EI) in Mwanza is currently working through three

Tanzania Assemblies of God (TAG) churches on the island to train women as breastfeeding and early nutrition peer-supporters. The vision of this venture is to establish women's groups which are a safe forum for women to learn about good child-feeding practices with a biblical basis. The aim being that, through sharing and gaining practical experience together, they will gain the



One of the mamas groups visiting a mum who had given birth the previous day

Simon, Victoria, Tabitha and Reuben Ewing



Simon and Victoria Ewing are working in Mwanza, Tanzania, facilitating a community health project. Together with their two young children, Tabitha and Reuben, they regularly travel to Kome island to work with the partnering churches. The children are homeschooled to allow the family to spend more time on the island.

Victoria has a PhD in public health, and Simon is a mechanical engineer.

Their project has two main parts: one involves training peer-educators on the topics of breastfeeding and early child nutrition. The other supports and trains families on aspects of household water, sanitation and hygiene. They are also involved in El's other projects in Mwanza and Church leadership training.

More information about Simon and Victoria's work on their blog, What Size Suitcase? Visit tinyurl.com/yxmr8ecu or scan the QR code.



skills needed to support other women in their own communities to make good child-feeding choices, even in challenging circumstances. Within the groups health education is combined with biblical training and the women are encouraged to see their roles as peer-supporters as part of their Christian ministry. Typically in this context, health education is delivered to women through a 'top down' approach within health facilities - women are given little opportunity to ask questions or engage in collective learning activities. We are working to establish groups within which these barriers can be broken down. We are using group based activities, discussions and practical resources. Through these we've seen the women open up, share their experiences and be willing to ask questions and engage together.

The training sessions that we run each week cover a number of topics, such as practical issues around breastfeeding; nutritious foods; and include topics such as reproductive health and HIV, which are also related to breastfeeding. Each topic has its own set of prompts - breasts crocheted by a nurse and supporter of the project; food sorting activities; and a



Health conference food sorting activity

fuzzy felt full overview of the reproductive system! These resources are popular for breaking the ice; giving the women a giggle; answering questions in a clear and visual way; and getting everyone involved! Teaching in local schools is, for the most part, done by rote learning, and the women join the groups not expecting to be involved in the activities. At some points it has been difficult to encourage the women to join in but we've made a lot of progress and the women now ask a lot of questions and arrive expecting to participate!

We have run a food sorting activity several times, both for the women to take part in during the groups and for the women to lead outside of the groups. The activity is intended to help the participants think about how different types of foods benefit our body. Participants are encouraged to think about how they can plan their daily meals to include types of foods from the different main food groups - they work in groups to sort the foods in different ways. Women from two groups led this activity at a health conference we ran for pastors, church leaders and members from Kome Island and another nearby island called Kasarazi. As it is difficult at times to encourage participation in activities, it is also difficult to encourage the women to not do the activity for the other participants when they are leading. It's difficult to know how much of this is due to the fact that they still don't quite understand the purpose of participation and how much is due to the fact that many of the women have found it difficult to imagine that they could lead a group. Some of the women have explained that, even after a lot of training, they don't feel as though they have anything to give in terms of leading seminars. The majority of the women we work with have very

little education and a fairly junior position within the community. We are working to encourage them to both see the gifts and skills that they have and to be willing to use what they have, no matter how small they think it is.

Another topic that has been interesting has been that of reproductive health. This was not initially planned. However, when we introduced the topic of the effects of breastfeeding on fertility, the women had a lot of questions and a whole topic was built out of this. These have been some of the sessions that the women have listened most intently to and had most questions about. We are very blessed to have Gertrude on our team because she approaches every topic, no matter whether it's a cultural taboo, without a fleck of embarrassment and is ready to discuss anything.

The women are encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences with other women in their communities. They learn to encourage other women positively and avoid being critical or negative about other women's approach to feeding their children. The women are encouraged to visit new or expectant mothers and to help in any way they can, especially in regard to supporting feeding. Visiting new mums is normal in



Reproductive health

the culture here - women help to clean the house and collect water during the early post-natal period.

The challenges faced by women in these communities are multifaceted; lack of income can limit women's ability to provide their children with good food. We've seen these groups as an opportunity to combine learning with income generation, while at the same time providing motivation for the women to attend the groups. Each session combines health and bible training with community banking, known as VICOBA. Each session starts with an opportunity for the women to invest in the bank by 'buying shares'. They are also able to take business loans from the income generated through these shares. Loans are repaid with a small interest and this contributes to the income generated by the group. At the end of the year the women can choose whether to split the money, invest it, or carry it over to the following year.



Women participating in VICOBA (village community bank)

The women have a lot of responsibility for running the VICOBA sessions. They nominate a chair person, a bookkeeper and key holders. As a group they agree on the terms and rules of the group, e.g. fees, share cost, interest, repayment

rate, etc. It has been very encouraging seeing how the women have developed so many skills as they've worked together to complete the paperwork and weekly accounting. It has also been encouraging to see the ways in which the women have made use of the loans they have taken. Some women have decided to take larger loans and have used them to set up businesses, for instance stalls selling fruit and vegetables. Others take smaller loans, with which they can buy goods, such as large bags of charcoal to be divided into small portions and sold locally for a profit. This year we plan to incorporate entrepreneurship training into the sessions, to help the women make good use of the loans they take and the capital they generate through the scheme.

By the end of this year we are hoping to have established a group through the fourth TAG church on the island. We're also working on encouraging the women to begin making more use of their skills within their communities, for example through running seminars for community members and through visiting local schools, e.g. to conduct the food sorting activity described above. We've been encouraged by how this project has progressed during our first year on Kome island and are looking forward to seeing how things continue.

The Annual Conference and AGM of 2019 was a great success and a fitting celebration of EIUUK's mission work. Read a full report in next month's BushNet!

Dates for your diary

Board Meeting: 17 May 2019 in London