



**International Study Week on  
Children of Prisoners in Uganda**

**hosted by**

**Wells of Hope Ministries**

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## Introduction

I was delighted to be able to attend this year's international study week on children of prisoners in Kampala, Uganda, from 23 to 28 September 2013. Hosted by Wells of Hope Ministries, the programme included meetings with charities, non-government organisations, and the Ugandan Prison Service as well as visits to schools, prisons, and family members' homes. It was a week rich in opportunity to engage, reflect, and learn alongside international colleagues from the UK and the US. During my visit, I was also given an opportunity to share the development work that Families Outside has been doing with schools as well as deliver training to teachers and Wells of Hope staff.

It is hard to summarise the impact of an experience such as this. While I was in Uganda, I wrote a regular blog for the Families Outside website, and this report is a compilation of my writing. As well as an overview of the study week, the blogs provide an insight into the main issues and challenges facing families affected by imprisonment and the organisations that support them.

Finally, I would like to thank Francis and his team for putting together such a full and engaging programme; St Paul's and St George's Church in Edinburgh for helping us to meet the costs of the study week; and the Families Outside team for their support and encouragement.

For more information about Wells of Hope Ministries, visit [www.wellssofhope.org](http://www.wellssofhope.org).



## Hope In Action

On first meeting, it seems obvious that Francis Ssuubi would ooze such optimism and positivity; Ssuubi means 'hope' in Lugandan, and the hope within him is almost tangible as he lives out his vision of improving the lives of children affected by imprisonment in Uganda. Listen to Francis' story, however, and the hope that he has seems nothing short of remarkable. Falsely accused by colleagues of a crime he did not commit, Francis was arrested in 2002



and spent sixty-eight days in prison. Understandably, this was a bleak time, and Francis found himself feeling confused and angry. What is amazing, though, is that he did not remain negative and bitter as his sentence progressed; rather, Francis found himself asking, 'Why am I here?'

So moved by his experiences of prison and those of his fellow inmates, and burdened by the affects that his imprisonment was having on his family and loved ones, Francis felt that the answer to his question was to reach out to children with a parent in prison. The idea for an organisation that would mitigate the impact of imprisonment on families was born, and in November 2005 Wells of Hope Ministries was officially launched.



Francis now has a team of committed colleagues around him, and together they are ensuring that some of Uganda's most vulnerable children are not forgotten. Like children in the UK, Ugandan children with a parent in prison experience loss, trauma, stigma, and shame. However, unlike their British counterparts they face additional risks such as being sold into slavery, child sacrifice, and being forced into child prostitution. Add to this the challenges of no phone calls into the prison and very infrequent visits (once a year is considered good), and it is clear why Wells of Hope is such a lifeline.



One of the main ways that Francis and his team support children of prisoners is through the Wells of Hope Academy. Situated thirty-two miles outside of Kampala, this is a boarding school that currently educates ninety-one children affected by imprisonment (as well as some from the local community). Here the focus is not only on education and the development of life skills, important as those are; at the Wells of Hope Academy, the children are given the opportunity to build a relationship with their imprisoned parent and are taken on regular visits to the prison. It's the only intervention of its kind in Uganda (and possibly also in Africa), and it quite simply changes people's lives – those of the children, their care-givers and, of course, imprisoned parents.



As I visited the Wells of Hope headquarters today in downtown Kampala, I noticed that the charity's strap line is, 'Love is Action.' That could just as easily read, 'Hope is Action'; it is hard to imagine someone embodying hope more than Francis Ssuubi.



## Faith, Hope & Love

It is perhaps no surprise that my first visit to a Ugandan prison felt, initially, very similar to those I have experienced at home; Luzira Upper Prison for men was built in 1927, while Uganda was still under British rule, and with its high external walls, barbed wire fencing, and prominence of prison guards, entering the prison and going through security felt pretty familiar to me.

What was very different about this visit was that we were visiting death row prisoners. I was more than a little nervous and didn't really know what to expect, but as we walked across the exercise yard, I was struck by the calm atmosphere as prisoners sat and chatted while two of the guards played chess. We were then led into an area that had been set up like a church where around sixty men in white shorts and shirts (the uniform for death row prisoners) had gathered to welcome us in a moving ceremony of songs, prayers, dancing, and testimonies about how *Wells of Hope* had helped the men to build (and in some cases begin) relationships with their children.



As each one spoke and shared, the overwhelming sense was that these men had a deep faith (there were Christians and Muslims singing together, which was incredibly moving) and a firm hope in something beyond their own circumstances. In fact, several of them said, "the condemned section is now the redeemed section." Although the last known execution in Uganda took place several years ago, the men live in the knowledge that they will die in prison one way or another, and this makes their concern for their families all the more poignant.

Later, in a focus group discussion, the men spoke about the importance of education and felt strongly that if they had received a better education, they would not be in prison; of the twenty-five men we spoke to, only five of them had completed primary school, with just three going on to secondary school. As I listened to them talk (“Education is the key to the future”; “I don’t want my children to follow in my footsteps”; “Literacy is important.”), I found myself asking questions: Would these men’s stories have been different if they had gone to school? How is it possible to feel redeemed rather than condemned when sentenced to death? And why has the death penalty not been abolished in Uganda?

As we prepared to leave the prison, we were presented with an avocado tree as a gift from the prisoners. I have since found out that the avocado symbolises love. Of all the things that I thought I might experience in a visit to death row, faith, hope, and love did not feature on my list. But I have read somewhere that, when all is said and done, these are the only things that matter.





## Prisoners of Hope

The women wore bright yellow dresses, their prisoner number, and date of entry into Luziro Women's Prison, written in black marker pen across the front. Eight of them were huddled on the floor ready to engage in our focus group; we were offered chairs to sit on, but it seemed wrong to do that, so we took off our shoes and sat with them (it is common in Ugandan prisons for prisoners to sit on the floor while visitors take a chair).



While the male prisoners we had visited earlier that day felt that lack of education was a major factor in committing crime, these women weren't so sure it was that simple. Yes, they told us, education is important (hardly any of them had completed primary school, never mind gone to secondary), but as one woman put it, "Anger and unforgiveness bring people into prison, not poverty or lack of education." Most of these women's crimes had been committed against a family member, and in many cases they had suffered abuse and mistreatment at the hands of their victims. I found myself wondering, if they had completed their schooling and developed skills such as communication, anger management, and a sense of self confidence, whether they would have ended up here.



As their stories unfolded in Lugandan (and in one case Swahili which I was called upon to translate!) we were grateful for the pauses for translation that allowed us to take in what they were saying. These stories were heartbreaking. Joyce (not her real name) was arrested in 2000. Her property was destroyed by those who arrested her, and her daughter (just a baby at twenty months) went to live with Joyce's mother, ten hours away from the prison. She had lost hope, she told us, until about a year ago when Wells of Hope staff visited her in prison and listened to her story. Francis and his team managed to track Joyce's mother and daughter and quickly established that a place at the Wells of Hope Academy boarding school would be helpful; Joyce's mother had been condemned by the community for her daughter's crime and was struggling to raise



her granddaughter, never mind send her to school. Now Joyce's daughter not only receives education and support, she is able to visit her mother in prison three times a year. "I had lost hope", Joyce told us, "but now I am a prisoner of hope."

Not all of the stories left us feeling hopeful. One woman told us of her sixty year sentence for a crime that she insisted she and her husband did not commit (he was also sentenced to sixty years). Obviously, we only heard her account, but even if she were guilty, her sentenced seemed unbelievable to us; in Uganda people serve the full term - sixty years means sixty years, with no parole arrangement. Whatever the facts of the alleged crime, this sentence had taken away the lives of two possibly innocent adults and made four children in effect orphans. If it weren't for Wells of Hope, and help from grandparents, there really would be very little hope.

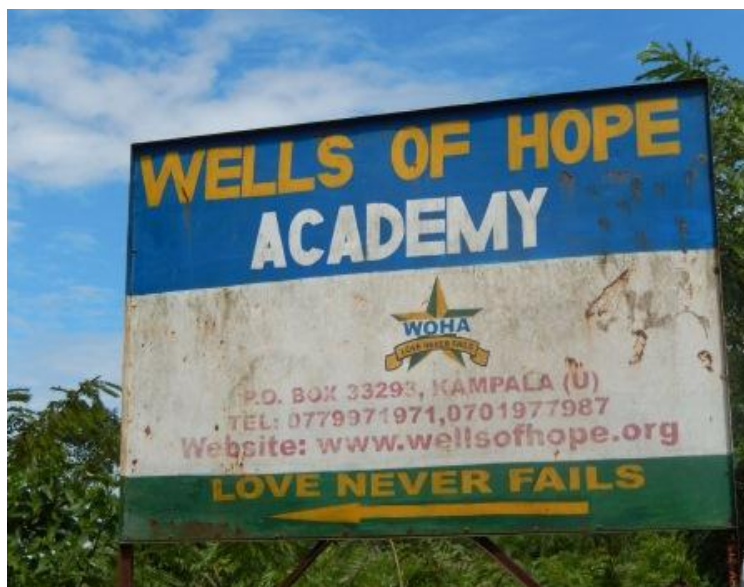


As the women went back to their quarters, we could hear the sound of singing and chatting as the other prisoners gathered in groups around the grounds. There are around three hundred and sixty women at Luziro Prison who each have an average of five children. Wells of Hope is supporting fifteen children whose mothers are in this prison - a tiny proportion of the overall need. Despite this, I found Joyce's declaration of being a prisoner of hope incredibly uplifting. Knowing that there is a well of hope from which to draw, keeps these women going and offers the rest of us a place from where we can help make a difference.

## Children of Hope

It took about an hour and a half to drive the thirty-two miles to Kyajinja to visit the Wells of Hope Academy, a boarding school for primary aged children of prisoners. The roads got bumpier and bumpier as we wound our way into rural Uganda, and as we watched people digging their fields and collecting water from the well, life seemed a far cry from the hustle bustle of Kampala.

It might seem strange to have an entire school for the children of prisoners, but you only need to consider the alternatives (dropping out of school altogether; rejection by remaining family members and the community; child-headed households; risk of child sacrifice and witchcraft; and, for girls, an increased risk of rape and, therefore, teenage pregnancy and often HIV / AIDS, too), and you quickly realise that this school is literally a lifesaver for many of the children. At Wells of Hope Academy, school fees are waived for children of imprisoned parents; interestingly, it has such a good reputation that there are now around 40 pupils from the local community whose parents willingly pay for their children to attend.



Throughout our day with them, the Wells of Hope pupils bowled us over with their enthusiasm and positive outlook. They were keen to show us their achievements and did a series of presentations for us on things they had been learning including a lesson on how to treat a snake bite (which thankfully we didn't need!). There was singing, dancing, poetry, and sketches, too, and in many of these performances, reference was made to the issues that they faced as children of an imprisoned parent. They spoke about being vulnerable and experiencing stigma, shame, and bullying, and it struck me that in tackling these things head on, and naming them, they were somehow free from the unhelpful labelling that can keep children stuck. Because so many others were in the same position, they weren't different or outcast: "We are all together," one of them told me, "We are brothers and sisters."

Having come from households where life was tough (many had been in charge of younger siblings, some had gone hungry, others had been abused by step-parents, and almost none of them had been attending school), being a boarder at Wells of Hope Academy had changed their lives. I asked a group of them what they most liked about school, and they said:

- "I eat well here and am looked after."
- "I like the food!"
- "I like studying."
- "I have friends here."
- "I like visiting my mother in prison."

It is this last comment that makes this school so unique: three times a year, each pupil is taken to the prison where his or her mother or father is and is able to have an extended visit arranged by the Wells of Hope staff in partnership with the Ugandan Prison Service. The children became very emotional in describing these visits to the prison; clearly, it meant the world to them to have this connection and to be able to build a relationship with their imprisoned parent. Wells of Hope Academy really is an extraordinary school; it is educating Uganda's future leaders and, most importantly, it is creating children of hope.





## The Gift of Hope



Marjorie is a social worker with Wells of Hope, and her main role is to provide support to families affected by imprisonment and to link parents in prison with their children. She works closely with the carers of children who have an imprisoned parent, and we were invited to shadow her on some family visits; this is Family Support Work (one of Families Outside's most important services) Ugandan style, and I was interested to compare Marjorie's role with what happens in Scotland.

Like in Scotland, when a mother goes to prison here, it is the grandmothers who often pick up the pieces and take on the care of the children. What's different in Uganda is that grandparents are often called upon when a father goes to prison, too; in many cases, women whose husbands are imprisoned marry another man just so that they can get by financially. Unfortunately, these new husbands are often reluctant to take on stepchildren, leaving grandparents to take guardianship of the children, or indeed in many cases, leaving children in charge of younger siblings.



One of the huge challenges that Marjorie faces is the long distances she has to travel. Often this involves taking a minibus ('taxis' in Uganda), followed by a hair-raising ride on the back of a so called 'boda boda' (a motorbike and the most popular, and cheapest, form of 'public' transport). We were fortunate to have a hire vehicle for the day to cover the eight hours of driving needed to visit just two families.

As we travelled further and further into rural Uganda, the tarmac road quickly became a rough dirt track, and there were a few scary moments overtaking or being overtaken! We passed women (and it was mostly women) carrying amazing loads on their heads or bicycles; took in colourful road-side stalls selling fresh produce and an astounding array of household items; and were confronted with the more sobering sight of children digging in the fields instead of being at school. After three hours, we reached a tiny mud hut village and stopped at the home of a grandfather whose two sons are in prison.



Seeing the impact of extreme poverty close up is hard to describe in words. This 74-year old man, in poor health himself and suffering from acute toothache, has two grandchildren at the Wells of Hope Academy and a further four whom he is caring for at home (Wells of Hope have a policy of only taking two children from each family in order to spread their service and its impact, and we gained an insight into how agonising some of these decisions are for Marjorie and her team). The children wore dirty rags and were clearly undernourished, looking much younger than we were told they were. One of them was sick, and their grandfather spoke of his struggle to eke out a living which provided enough food, never mind medicines and school fees.

As with Families Outside's Family Support Workers, Marjorie's support for this man is invaluable. Her presence at his home has meant that others in the community have felt more able to reach out in support. She has listened, and he has been able to cry and share his concerns. Of course, there are dilemmas: Wells of Hope, like Families Outside, has a policy of not giving cash hand-outs; rather, Marjorie assists people in accessing help which is more sustainable. In this case, however, the study week participants felt so compelled to do something that we decided to pay for the grandfather to have his tooth fixed so that he could at least return to digging his fields to grow food.







Our next visit was to a grandmother whose story left us feeling much more positive. She was living in a vibrant community where she had a good support network. She also had two grandchildren at the Wells of Hope Academy, but in contrast to Marjorie's previous client, the remaining children were attending school and were in good health. Again, we watched as Marjorie took time, listened, and empathised, and the grandmother told us of how much this support meant to her.

Spending a day with Marjorie was an enormous privilege, and seeing how much difference her support made to people in extreme need made me think of our own Family Support Workers. The poverty might be more extreme and the distances greater, but so many of the issues are the same, and the support that Marjorie at Wells of Hope and our own support team at Families Outside offers is invaluable. In our daily debrief that evening, the other group told us of a desperate situation they had encountered, rather like that of the grandfather we had met; here was a grandmother living in a house that was falling down around her, dealing with a level of poverty and illness that was hard to watch. When asked, 'What do you need?' the group, expecting her to mention a new house, or money, was astounded to hear her reply: 'I need companionship', she said. Family support work, whether in Scotland or Uganda, is about saying to people, 'You are not alone in this.' It is about getting alongside people who feel isolated and ashamed and helping them reconnect to the community that has so often rejected them. Ultimately, it is about giving people hope, and that's a gift you cannot put a price on.





## Hope for the Future

On the final day of the study week, participants gathered for a half-day seminar at the Imperial Hotel, Kampala, to share our thoughts and experiences with interested parties. We acknowledged that, if isolated and unsupported, children affected by imprisonment do not do well, regardless of where they live. In so many ways, the issues facing children with a parent in prison are the same the world over, and this means that organisations like Families Outside and Wells of Hope, although working in very different contexts, have much to learn from, and share with, one another. The support provided by Wells of Hope clearly enables children to flourish and their carers to cope, and Francis and his team provide some excellent models of working with some of the most vulnerable members of society. I was particularly interested in the thoughts of the children whom we met and sensed a strong echo with what children in Scotland say. The Ugandan young people were very clear about their needs:

- They wanted just one trusted teacher to be told about their situation, as they feared rumours being spread, bullying, and stigmatisation;
- They valued the peer support they received from other Wells of Hope children who knew how they were feeling; and
- They wanted teachers to attend awareness raising sessions so they would be more aware of the issues faced by them.

What's encouraging about this is that if children the world over are saying the same things (and they seem to be), then collectively we can take their voices and turn words into action. For me, the international study week was very much the beginning of the conversation. There is much to be done, but the thought of doing it together fills me with hope, and hope seems a very good place from which to start.

