

The inspirational ladies of Yei MU

They are a damaged generation. Women who witnessed the most appalling cruelty and atrocity, women who were forced to scrape a living in a barren bush, to kowtow to the soldiers, women submitted to the indignity of being a refugee in a foreign land.

Yet the 1,499 members of the Mothers' Union of the Diocese of Yei are proud and strong. In the words of one member, Catherine Aya: "Despite all the suffering we did not lose faith in a living God. Wherever we fled, we made a church in a shed."



Most of Yei MU members are widows. Many spent 21 years living with their children in the wild or in makeshift camps in the bush. Others trekked for weeks in search of the relative safety of the camps for displaced people in the Congo, Uganda or Kenya. These were perhaps the 'lucky' ones, those whose children had a chance of school. For those in the bush, a whole generation missed out on education. Many, many died.

Some of their stories are told in the article on Survivors on this website. They are home now, earning a living for their families as best they can. For most, this means cutting grass in the bush and selling it in Yei where it is used to roof tukuls and other buildings.

Bishop Hilary's wife Mama Joyce is Patron, or President, of Yei MU. They have three meetings a year, including a general assembly, but meet every Tuesday for at least two hours in churches and homes across the diocese for a Day of Prayer.

Like Connor MU, they aim to help others, in particular women, and often take toiletries and other essentials to new mothers. They also counsel first time mothers and visit the sick in hospital and the ill and those in difficulty in outlying villages. The latter can, in some cases, mean a walk of 80 to 100 miles. Member Mary Tumulu admits this walking can be 'tedious work', but she said: "We go into the community to see that all the people are in harmony. They are supposed to be united and forgive each other and know that God is there and Jesus is their personal saviour."



She said one of the rewards of MU membership was fellowship. "Many of the women have no husbands and even those who do can have problems so it is good to be able to share," she said.

MU members also have the freedom to enter Yei Prison to speak to and pray for the prisoners, many of whom are thieves and murderers. "These are our children, so we do not



abandon them,” said Mary Gboka, 45 (left). Mary learned English before the civil war, but today has no job. She uses her skills to help the MU and today she translates members’ stories for me. “I feel my calling is to raise the standard of life for women here,” she says.

The MU will lobby government on social issues – last year they successfully campaigned to have people who came to Yei to practice witchcraft deported back to their own countries.

Mary Gboka stressed that the MU members are willing to work but have limited skills and most have no education. One of their big projects in Yei is to run the new nursery school, just built after CMS mission partner Carolyn Murray raised the bulk of the funding through a parachute jump. Through the nursery school the MU will strive to educate Yei’s very many young children in the Christian way of living.

The ladies are also involved in a basket making project and hand dye fabrics. Unfortunately there is limited market for their wares and they have to be transported to the region’s capital Juba to be sold – not an easy option.

When Bishop Hilary led me over to the MU office the ladies jumped up from where they sat outside, many in their smart blue and white uniforms, and began dancing, singing and making music. It was so warm and welcoming. At the end they thanked me for making the journey to Yei and prayed very generously for Connor Diocese and my work. They were delighted when I extended the greetings of Connor MU and diocesan president Moira Thom.



I was presented with two small woven items by branch leader Esterida Amude (above, centre) and we had fun as Mary Gboka tried to work my digital camera to get a group photo. What a joy when, on my request, the ladies again danced and sang. They were an absolute inspiration.