

# EXPERIENCING BROTHERHOOD AND MERCY

*Gretty Fokker (28), one of the 'Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood', the Youth Movement of CMM, left at the end of September in 2014 for Oyugis, Kenya, to work for a few months as a volunteer at OIP (Oyugis Integrated Project) of the Brothers CMM. The project aims to prevent HIV/AIDS infection and to provide care and support to people who are suffering from the effects of it. Gretty is training to become a general practitioner. She worked at the healthcare center of OIP, which offers accessible healthcare to people. Mid-December 2014 she returned to the Netherlands. How did she experience her time in Kenya?*



*Gretty Fokker.*

In 2007 I joined the 'Ambassadors', firstly for a very special journey to the World Youth Days in Sydney the following year. But this movement promised to have so much more on its program. The preparations were intense, instructive, spiritually deepening and motivating and the journey itself was fabulous. In a period of three weeks a close feeling of brotherhood developed with people from the whole world (Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, Namibia, and the Netherlands). Strong friendships grew with young people we first of all didn't even know what they would look like. We celebrated, we sang, we talked and laughed. Those friendship bonds continued after the journey. We keep in touch through email and Facebook. Since that time I have been to Kenya a couple of times, but no more than a few weeks at a time. The friendships that

developed in 2008 continued to grow and new contacts were formed.

## Feeling connected

In 2014 I was heavily involved in my doctor's study. A moment of reflection ... in 18 months time I would have completed my studies and I could begin to settle as a general practitioner. But the idea that started me off on my medical career was still there ... I also would have loved to work in Africa, or at least I wanted to experience once what it would be like. After speaking with the Superior General Brother Huitema at the time, I knew what to do: I would go Oyugis in Kenya to join the team at the health center of the Brothers CMM.



*The OIP building.*



*Mary Mboya (medical nurse), Gretty Fokker, Jacqueline Awino (secretary), Christine Atieno (pharmacist) and her daughter at DIP.*

I arrived at Nairobi Airport on September 22 and was welcomed by a brother and three ambassadors. The feeling of being connected returned immediately and in the weeks that followed it would only increase. After a week of special and warm meetings with ambassadors I travelled on to Dyugis and familiarized myself with the project. I was amazed at the variety of activities: dressmaking, school fund, and library, support of the people in many different ways, and of course the medical department. I was to work there for almost three months.

#### Health care

The medical center caters largely for those infected by HIV. Seventeen percent of the population is HIV-positive. At DIP people can undergo tests, receive HIV information and when they are infected they can participate in the treatment program. They receive regular tests, personal attention and free medication. They are first screened by a nurse, and then visit the doctor who gives them the prescription and if necessary decides to do a medical examination. Then there is the outpatients' department, the place where I have worked, where anyone can apply for medical care. I notice how the patients find the treatment here pleasant and affordable. A whole

range of complaints and illnesses passes the review: malaria, typhoid, influenza, headaches, asthma, high blood pressure, HIV, and large open wounds that take months to heal; I could continue. Healthcare in Kenya is quite different from that in the Netherlands. There is hardly any medical insurance, and so every visit to the doctor, every laboratory test, every medication has to be paid for. But many patients simply do not have the money. Nearly every patient is sent to the laboratory, usually to be tested for malaria and typhoid. These tests are not all that reliable, but there is nothing we can do about it. Very few physical examinations are performed and almost every patient is given antibiotics for bacterial infections or to prevent them. The resistance (to antibiotics) which may result from this – and which we are very scared of in the Netherlands – is not discerned in Kenya. From one point of view this is quite understandable because the people here are much more susceptible to infections due to the overall living conditions. You do not easily ask people to come back the next day to find out how they are getting on. But sometimes it was very frustrating and stirred up the inevitable discussions. I learned a great deal from it and hopefully my discussion partners did likewise.



## Poverty

Every working day I would be available for consultation together with a nurse. This way it was easy to exchange experiences and knowledge. I hope that a number of things I suggested will be adopted. I definitely take home a lot of what I have learned. The most difficult thing was poverty. It is painful to hear



*Children from the neighbourhood.*

that patients cannot pay for their medication or cannot afford one euro for a laboratory test. You saw patients coming back who did not go to hospital because of the costs, even though we had referred them to hospital for treatment or examination. And then you try and treat them yourself as best as possible. However, after I had visited the local hospital myself, it seemed better to refer as few people as possible to hospital because of the miserable conditions there.

## Learned a great deal

OIP really is a great help to the population of Oyugis as the project is aimed at an integral approach and supports people over a whole range of areas. Those who work at OIP encourage the people to become

self-reliant and they try to form networks among the population for mutual support. The project makes an important contribution to the improvement of the health care. The health care center is a true relief for the people when compared to the miserable and overcrowded district hospital or the more expensive alternatives in the area. I have learned a great deal both medically but also at the personal level. I have gained a better understanding of Kenya and her cultures. I have seen how people deal with poverty, how they have to struggle hard to get sufficient food on the table, how strong they can be in difficult circumstances and how people cope with suffering. I have also seen plenty of beautiful things: people who genuinely enjoy life and live their faith with joy. My stay with the brothers also meant a great deal to me. I was allowed to celebrate with them: the Eucharist in the morning, the evening prayer at night. I have been able to share their life for a few months. This has given me firmer roots in my faith and made me stronger as a person. They really made me feel at home in their house. For a week I was able to share my experiences in Kenya with my parents. In one week they visited all the projects of the Brothers CMM in Kenya, a journey that left a deep impression on them. Following our experiences the VNB (Vereniging Nationale Bedevaarten – National Association for Pilgrimages) is organizing for October 2015 an 'inspirational journey' to Kenya with the theme: 'Works of Mercy: In the Footsteps of the Brothers of Tilburg'. During this journey many projects of the brothers will be visited, including OIP. You can write about an experience in words, or talk about it, but to live the experience is so much more effective.

Gretty Fokker



*End-of-the-year meeting of the ambassadors at the novitiate of the Brothers CMM at Sigana, Kenya.*