

April-May 2025 Visitor Report by Amy Lees

We arrived at Bethany on 22nd April and were warmly greeted by the children, young people, and staff. As first-time visitors, both Dianne and I were struck by just how welcome we were made to feel, and by the sense of togetherness shared by the members of the family. After a few days of getting ourselves acquainted with the daily routine and beginning to get to know some of the care workers, teachers, and the children, Dianne and I spent much of our time in the Pre- and Primary School, where we were enlisted to help with lessons, especially in English. Dianne did lots of reading with the children in order to help guide them with pronunciation, and I taught lessons in grammar, as well as writing and speaking skills. I also led an evening class for the secondary-aged children after they had returned home from school in order to focus on any areas of the English syllabus that they were finding challenging. These students were incredibly hardworking and a delight to teach.

On Sunday 27th April, we visited Teddy and Kabula, who gave us a tour of their High School at Mkula. They explained that the single working tap with clean drinking water had stopped working for over two weeks. A few of us were taken to see the dormitories shared by 120 girls. There were small, doorless rooms leading off from a main corridor, each containing 3-5 bunk beds, some of which accommodated more than one young woman. The condition of the toilets and showers was very poor and unsanitary. Despite the immensely challenging conditions, both Teddy and Kabula seemed determined to succeed and it was a pleasure to meet them.

On Thursday 1st May, we visited the local Primary and Secondary Schools, attended by many of the children and young people who live at Bethany. The classrooms at Mwitongo Primary School were bare and filled with about twenty wooden benches and desks, which seated four children each according to one of the secondary girls who had come with us from Bethany. There was one tap in a metal cage. The conditions at Sogeska Secondary School showed no improvement. We were introduced to the dormitory block in which every girl in Form 4 were told they would have to stay during exam season. The dormitory was made up of an entrance room, a corridor, and four small rooms which were bare and filled with bat droppings. We were told that many of the students would sleep on the floor, with no mattress or even sheet to speak of. There was a single toilet and shower in a small building in the yard outside. Despite it being a day off for students and teachers, there was a girl staying on her own in this building, as she lived too far from her family to travel to school each day. Although we were later informed that she would stay in the teachers' block during the night, she was nonetheless alone when we met her, and it was difficult to imagine her being alone for the rest of the day and for many weekends to come.

After our visit to the local schools, the importance of the existing Bethany Pre- and Primary School and the need for the Secondary School were evident to me. We were shown around what will become the admin block for the Secondary School, and it is encouraging to see the progress that has been made - the roof was being finished off when we arrived. The building should contain a spacious staffroom, offices, and store cupboard, and it is exciting to imagine how the building could one day become the hub for a brand new Secondary School.

Overall, as a first-time visitor, I was slightly in awe of the way in which the children and young people at Bethany were committed to their studies and to supporting each other. It was a privilege to meet them, and the teachers and care workers who support them.