

We Went to Uganda

By Elizabeth Parker, Kristina Hargie, Anne C. Sitorius
MFT Students

We went to Uganda! After a seventeen-hour plane ride and a six-hour bus ride, nine students and two professors from Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling, arrived in beautiful and lush Fort Portal, Uganda. We had been invited to come to the Bishop Magambo Counselor Training Institute (BMCTI) by its founder Dr. Father Pascal Kabura. Dr. Teresa McDowell, Director of Marriage, Couple and Family Therapy program at Lewis and Clark had been in communication with Dr. Kabura since her previous visit to Uganda five years ago.

Dr. Kabura founded the institute to help train Ugandans in the mental health profession. The institute offers a range of training from certificate programs to a Masters in Counseling. Dr. Kabura runs the programs along with his colleagues who are former students of the institute.

Dr. Kabura invited us to develop a seven-day introduction to family therapy. When asked about the reasons he was interested in this partnership, Dr. Kabura responded that he wanted, "Lewis and Clark counseling department and BMCTI share and promote a cross-cultural experience in therapy particularly in the area of marriage and family so both institutions could expand their knowledge through academic and social interaction between students and staff." He also noted that, "both institutions could contribute to rich, jointly researched and constructed knowledge."

For six months we put together a workshop on family therapy that we thought would be transferable to the Ugandan contexts. We shared a number of theoretical concepts, tools, and skills including: Rituals, family structure, genograms, multiple embedded systems, domestic violence, patterns of interaction, gender relationships, eco-maps, the family life cycle, narrative therapy, Narrative Theater, practical skills for family therapist and so on. We focused on delivering the workshop in a collaborative manner that allowed for critique and consideration of applying ideas across cultures. For example when talking about the family life cycles we initially talked about events in families lives that seemed to be universal, like birth and death, and then used participant caucus groups to identify family cycles that are particular to the Ugandan contexts and cultures.

Every morning we engaged in a ritual to signify the start of a new day together and to demonstrate the power of rituals. We all held hands in a large circle under the hot Ugandan sun. One person in the middle would yell out "Come closer, Come closer!" Then each person, about fifty of us total, would push together until we just couldn't get any closer, all the while laughing and giggling and yelling about getting stepped on. We would yell out "Good Morning!" and retreat backwards into the larger circle. Once back in the big circle we would do a little dance or sing a little song, or shake hands with the person next to us (depending on the day). We always ended by singing the Bishop Magambo Counselor in Training Institute theme song that went a little

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something like "Training counselors to help in need, training to listen with another ear, the third ear!" The morning ritual was a wonderfully, silly way to start the day. It reminded us all that we were coming together to share and collaborate as a community of learners.

A Lewis & Clark student who went to Uganda she said this about her experience, "In Uganda it really seems like the community is the foundation for health and wellbeing. There is a sense of warmth and companionship that goes beyond the family and into the community. It makes me rethink how I interact with people in my neighborhood and the larger community. As a future MCFT, I see my role as a therapist to go beyond seeing clients in an office or within an organization to being active within the community by promoting social justice."

While we each had our own unique experience, we all hope to integrate what we learned in our future work with clients. Our professors, Dr. Brown and Dr. McDowell, fearlessly led the way in our collaboration and seamlessly negotiated discussions across all social locations. Throughout the process, our professors mentored our personal and professional development.

In an effort to help increase the overall cultural competence of Marriage and Family Therapists of Oregon we wanted to write about our experience in Uganda. We feel it is important to share what we, as clinicians and students, are doing in regards to collaboration. We are excited to contribute our experience and hope to learn more about what others in Oregon are doing with regard to cross cultural and international work.

About the Authors

Elizabeth Parker is a second year student at Lewis and Clark College. She loves to travel and has spent time in West Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe. Elizabeth is interested in international work and loves writing, making jewelry, and swimming.

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