

Community Offenders Programme

IcFEM's involvement with the Community Offenders started in about 2000 when two offenders were allocated to the Mission to work in the grounds at headquarters and at the Dreamland Medical Care Centre. Not surprisingly, the staff did not treat them as criminals, but ministered to them. Over the next few years many other offenders were seconded to IcFEM and rather than exploiting these people the IcFEM staff supported and advised them with some good results. Their probation officers saw how the offenders who went to IcFEM were helped, and other offenders asked to be sent there. Finally the supervisors asked for a combined meeting for offenders from the Division. This grew into a series of meetings covering such things as how to set up a business, repentance, the law, faith and hard work. Those who came were given lunch and tea; 100 people registered for the meetings. Those who completed the course were offered certificates, which gave them a reference name when seeking employment and the mission was asked to start similar ministry in the whole of Bungoma District.

By 2004, the Kenyan government had asked for the training of the community offenders to become wider and more organised. The offenders attended regular meetings and were given leave of absence and encouragement to attend the meetings. An example of one of these meetings in 2004 is that 80-100 men and women with government officials/wardens and probation officers attended it. The meeting consisted of Christian teaching followed by a session of confidence building with attitudes teaching on God-given freedoms to exist, to work, to love, to relate, to sell one's labour, etc. Following this the meeting broke into discussion groups about how offenders could tackle their own problems to set up in business, etc and a spokesman for each group reported back at the end of the meeting.

Unlike community offenders in the UK, where community service is an original sentence, in Kenya it is a progression for good behaviour, and nearly all the offenders had been in prison. The meetings covered murder, violence, robbery, prostitution, petty theft, illicit brewing, etc. The women were mainly in prison for illicit brewing or prostitution. One of the UK trustees who attended this meeting was struck by how articulate the attendees were being mostly literate and well able to report a group discussion and take notes. It appeared that they were the bright members of society often suffering from bewilderment and frustration at the lot that life had dealt them, depressed and squashed, criminally streetwise, but not constructively streetwise and therefore ripe for training and change.

By 2005 the programme was more organised still with offenders now coming to the IcFEM conference hall rather than speakers having to go out although this has meant that IcFEM is bearing the brunt of the financial cost. The government have now asked the Mission to extend the programme and set up meetings in venues further away as the programme has had such success in changing people from a life of crime to being useful members of society with successful businesses, etc. Unfortunately the funding for this extension is unclear but the programme has been so successful in Kimilili that there are no longer adequate numbers of community offenders for the programme to be run. Other districts such as Bungoma West, where there are over 500 people on community service orders, have requested IcFEM to run the programme for them. There have also been requests from two prisons but, at present, these have been declined due to lack of funds to cover costs but it is however hoped that the government of Kenya will fund the extension of this programme.

In March 2007 the IcFEM team was called upon to run a three-day workshop on entrepreneurship strategies for probation officers in Western province. Clearly there is still much to be done.