



## The Camillians: Ministering to the Sick of Karungu

By Stephen Mukhongi

St. Camillus Mission Karungu hospital located in Migori County is no ordinary village hospital. Despite its location, some 430 Kilometres from Nairobi, on the edge of Lake Victoria, near Kenya's frontier with Tanzania, the hospital is an ultra-modern health facility.

Other than the splendid view of the Lake, Karungu is the typical Kenyan country side; dirt roads and homesteads with semi-permanent houses made of mud, with grass-thatched roofs.

It is in this village that the missionaries of the Order of St. Camillus or Ministers of the Sick as they are fondly referred to, set up a mission with social projects such as Dala Kiye – Home of the orphans and the Hospital.

"I believe people everywhere have the right to quality health. That is why we have quality doctors, staff and equipment to do the job in a good way, plus we ensure there is no lack of drugs," says Fr Emilio Balliana, the Director of the hospital which today is a major health facility in the region.

Working on the motto, "We care with Love" the facility provides health services in different departments including: theatre department handling both minor and major operations, radiography, dental unit, children's welfare and antenatal clinic, VCT and rehabilitation centre, maternity wing and delivery rooms, 24 hours emergency wing and the hospital mortuary.

The Camillians first came to Kenya in 1976 at the request of Bishop Tiberius Charles Mugendi of the Catholic Diocese of Kisii who was looking for people to run the Mario Marini Hospital of Tabaka or Tabaka Mission Hospital as is commonly known, which had been built by Misereor and the diocese of Cremona.

After 15 years of presence in Tabaka Hospital the congregation decided to open its own institution in a different location. "We were too many there (about six of us) and we wanted to do something elsewhere as just Camillians," says Fr Emilio Balliana who was among the group of missionaries working in Tabaka.

The congregation had received several invitations from the Passionist Missionaries who were working in Karungu and had put up a parish, while a community of Sisters of Blessed Virgin who ran a school. The Camillians were urged to open a healthcare centre in the area in order to complete the mission.

After buying a parcel of land in the area, the congregation tasked Fr Emilio – who at the time was the youngest in the Community in Tabaka at 33 – and the late Bro Valentino Gastaldello, with the opening of Karungu Mission.

Born in Col San Martino, Italy on January 22, 1956, Fr Emilio Balliana nurtured the idea of becoming a missionary from a tender age. He was only 10 years old when he joined the congregation of The Order of St. Camillus.

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"I saw the Red Cross on their habits and I liked it. I admired what they were doing and I got interested in joining," narrates Fr Emilio in an interview with the *The Seed*.

His dream finally came true when he was ordained as a priest on November 27, 1982. Having completed a course in leprosy in Spain and later a diploma in nursing in Turin, Fr Emilio wished to work at the Camillian Social Center Chiang Rai in Thailand which during the early '70s supported people affected by leprosy.

"When my time to go on mission came I was not sent to Thailand as I had hoped, since at the time leprosy had already been cured and was no longer an emergency, but I was eager to go somewhere and so when the congregation asked me to come to Africa, I duly obliged," he states.

In January 1993, just months before Homa Bay was erected a diocese, the plans to build a hospital got underway.

"We preferred to come to Karungu specifically because it was an advantage to have constant supply of water as it is



Photo by Stephen Mukhongi 2016

A patient receives treatment at St. Camillus Mission Hospital. The health facility has transformed the lives of the people of Karungu and beyond.



*Fr Emilio Balliana, Director St. Camillus Mission Hospital Karungu. He says the hospital is a testament to the congregation's Charism of caring for the sick.*

unworkable to run a health institution without water," explains Fr Emilio adding that his experience working in Tabaka proved crucial in running the new institution.

Officially opened in 1997, the new health facility christened St. Camillus Mission Hospital Karungu, was a big blessing to the community at a time when there was a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and mortality in the area.

The missionaries with the large, red cross on their habits -- the symbol universally recognized as the sign of charity and service (Red Cross) would go on to change the lives of the community in Karungu in ways they had not imagined before.

"When we opened the lab we embarked on a screening campaign and we realized that about 40 percent of the population were infected, which at the time was one of the highest in the world," says Fr Emilio Balliana, the Director, St. Camillus Mission Hospital of Karungu.

According to Fr Emilio, high poverty levels, sex-for-fish practise in the fishing community as well as cultural customs such as wife inheritance were the main causes of the HIV epidemic.

Consequently, the hospital with the help of donors developed public awareness and education campaigns to address HIV prevention, treatment and care in the whole of the Catholic diocese of Homa Bay.

This included distribution of Antiretroviral drugs, prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) as well as initiating HIV support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS in the community.

According to Fr Emilio, 12 years from when the AIDS program began the prevalence rate in the area has reduced to 18 percent and today there are about 7000 people on the Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) program which is done at the centre and three other clinics in the area.

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Karungu left in its wake orphans some of whom were also infected with the virus. The Camillians together with the local Christian Community put up the St. Camillus Dala Kiye Children Welfare Home in 2001 with the aim of addressing the welfare of children affected by AIDS in Karungu community.



*Edwina Adenga a foster mother at St. Camillus Dala Kiye Children Welfare Home with some of her children. The home assists children affected by AIDS in Karungu community.*



*Fr Elphas Kolia, Administrator St. Camillus Dala Kiye Children Welfare Home with some of the children at the home. He says success stories of former students give him satisfaction in everything that they are doing.*

"Many children were left under the care of their grandparents. They used to come for assistance in the mission and so we decided to get somewhere where we can provide them with shelter, food, medication and education," states Fr Elphas Kolia, Administrator St. Camillus Dala Kiye Children Welfare Home.

Today the institution is home to 60 children living with HIV/AIDS (40 boys and 20 girls) who live in six houses in the compound. Each house has two mothers who act as care givers. Other than preparing the kids for school and ensuring that they routinely take their medicine, the mothers also teach the children life skills.

"I am always happy whenever I see them healthy and performing well in school and mine is to guide them and encourage them about their future," says Edwina Adenga a foster mothers at the home.

The missionaries also put up Blessed Luis Tezza Complex Nursery and Primary School, Blessed Luis Tezza Complex Secondary School where some of the children under the orphan support program school.

In total, the program has about 4000 beneficiaries including a number of pupils and students in government schools and at the university.

The presence of Camillians in Karungu has transformed the area from just being a landing site for fish to the centre of activities in the region, says Mr Andrew Onyango Okoth, a pastoral caregiver at the mission hospital.

"Apart from providing health care the institution has really changed this place which initially was a bush and has provided employment to many widows who make up majority of the subordinate staff in these institutions," Mr Okoth who is also a Camillian Lay Missionary says.

"Before the hospital was built here, people used to go all the way to Homa Bay or even Kisii for treatment," he adds.

As the congregation celebrates 40 years presence in Kenya, Fr Emilio, the man who alongside the late Bro Valentino Gastaldello was tasked with putting up the Karungu mission believes the future looks bright.

"I am proud of the mission because we are doing a big service to the community. I am not going to be here forever, but I hope the people who will be there are going to maintain the high standard. I have fulfilled my life more than what I was expecting," he concludes.

Photos by Stephen Mukhongi, 2016