

24 Jan 09

Dear Friends and Family,

*"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— **to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations."** Isaiah 61: 1 - 4*

In October 2007, the home of our very close friend, Fridah Gakii, burned to the ground. I can still remember her telling me that her house burned on the day following the fire. She was so casual and calm I could hardly believe what she was saying. She just kept saying that God was so good as no one was hurt. When we went to her home that afternoon and saw the devastation we were stunned. We could not identify furniture or any of their possessions as everything was destroyed.



Fridah & her family standing in the ashes Behind Keith and Mwathe is there small kitchen which did not burn

Fridah lived at home with her mother, her son, 4 year old Keith, her sister, Lillian and Lillian's 11 year old daughter, Daisy, her brother, Mwathe, and two cousins. Their home was wooden with 4 rooms – one was the sitting room, with a couch and two chairs, where Mwathe slept. Then there was Fridah and Keith's room, Lillian and Daisy's room, and a room which was partitioned 4 ways where her mother and two cousins slept, and two areas for storage. Each room was approximately 8' X 10'.

The fire started in the sitting room. Fridah had fixed some tea for her mom, Keith, Lillian and Daisy on a jiko (a small coal or wood burning grill). Daisy brought the jiko in the house as it was getting cool and she knew her grandmother enjoyed the warmth while drinking her tea. As she was placing the jiko in the sitting room, Fridah's mom called Fridah, Keith, and Daisy outside to see something. The Kenyan's always cover their sofas with pretty lace or cloth covers. The cloth covering the sofa set caught on fire. Lillian was in her room and felt the heat and saw smoke and miraculously got out unharmed. When Fridah saw what was happening she started screaming and shouting which brought neighbors running. When others arrived Fridah ran into her room and pulled out a bag of clothes and her phone. Those were the only things that survived the fire.

For the next many months Daisy, Keith and Fridah's mom lived in the kitchen. We asked Fridah to stay with us but she said she was living with a step-sister. Fridah's father was married before he married Fridah's mom. That wife died but had 3 children and Fridah stayed with one of them. We were never certain where the others stayed.

It took months to clear away the debris. We had assumed the house would be built on the ashes but learned that traditionally when a fire happens, that land is never used again for building. Most of the rest of the land was planted with tea so we could not imagine where they would build.

Fridah has been a leader in the church for as long as we have been in Kenya. Thus the church members helped by bringing a little money and sharing some pots, dishes and clothing. For months we met people visiting when we would go to visit. However, most of their friends have very little themselves thus much of the support they received was prayer support. I remember a neighbor saying they would never be able to rebuild a 4 room house. Fortunately our God is a God of the impossible and of the poor. Fridah and her family were helped by friends from afar!

We watched and waited as trees from their compound were cut down to provide the wood for a new home. A site was chosen and months of work were required to remove the tea plants whose roots often go down 10 – 12 feet and then level that land. Finally when the land was ready, large rocks that had been dug from the area that had been burned were used for the foundation. Then the March – May rains came. They were not heavy but from the 12 – 15 foot high fields directly behind the new home site, a spring appeared about 5 feet above the foundation and its path was through the planned home. This took months of talking to and working with friends, family and construction workers. Finally, the man who is in-charge of most of the building that happens at Maua Methodist Hospital, Boniface, came up with a solution that was implemented. Now the wooden walls could be completed, the zinc roof applied, and the cement floor poured. But again that was done over months.

January 10th Bill and I attended a double celebration with Fridah, her family, friends and neighbors. The first part of the celebration was for Mwathe, her brother, who was circumcised and emerging as a young man that day. The second was the blessing ceremony for their new home, 3 rooms built together and one room across from the three. The single room is where Mwathe spent his time of isolation and learning after being circumcised.

What a great day we all had with so much joy and thanksgiving. It was a different kind of experience from the circumcision ceremony held at the Gitari's on the hospital compound because it was held in the village and most of the village came. We recognized several grandmother's that are part of the AIDS Orphan's program and the man that stood with Mwathe as his 'father' is a close friend as my family built an AIDS Orphan's home for his two daughters and children.

I arrived at 1pm and found many neighbors and friends cooking porridge and stew, peeling potatoes, and mashing the potatoes, bananas and beans for ireo. It was a wonderful time of watching the friends helping and caring for each other.



Bill & one of the AIDS Orphan grandmothers



Women using 2 long, wooden spoons mash the ireo

At about 3:30pm, Mwathe and his mentor emerged from the one room house and the ceremony began. Again, the assistant pastor from our church was there and preached and prayed and then friends and community leaders talked about the importance of being a good Meru and Christian man. Mwathe sat quietly with his head down, as is the tradition, listening attentively. Many children, all ages and size, and old women wearing head scarves and their old and frayed but very clean clothing arrived and walked around, sat, listened, waved, watched and laughed as the ceremony progressed. Suddenly Keith, Fridah's son, realized that his uncle Mwathe was there and of course he hadn't seen him in one month so he ran, arms extended, behind the table where Mwathe was seated and began hugging his uncle. Mwathe's smile could not be hidden even with his head down and his obvious love for Keith was shown in the gentle ways he accepted Keith affection and questions. The ceremony never paused for Keith or the children and older women.



Keith, leaning back on Mwathe



Some of the children



One of the older ladies

Fridah's mom was so filled with joy when Mwathe was presented to her and fed her some cake. What an extraordinary day – her some becomes a man and out of the ashes a new home is created.

When Mwathe had been presented to everyone and his ceremony ended, the celebration and blessing of their new home began. The pastor prayed for the home and for what it represented to this family and the community. The impossible had happened. From the ashes and sorrow of everything that was lost had come the joy and beauty of a new home built on and by friendship, hard work, much patience and always the hope and faith that God is always with us and in our weakness can show His strength, in our waiting He can help us fly, and in our love He can show His light, power and presence.



3 room home (gourds filled with fermented porridge)



One room home across from three room home

Bill and I left around 6:15pm with a new appreciation of village life in our area, of friendship and how its threads reach around the world, and with a feeling of deep gratitude to God for the ways in which He works in the lives of His people. We had a better understanding why God loves the poor: Their love of Him, their joy and thanksgiving, their self-reliance on Him alone and their ability to make Him the focus of every celebration, every important event in their lives. Whether on the day of the fire or the day of the celebration, God's presence is seen, felt, acknowledged and celebrated.

In His grip,

Jerri & Bill Savuto
savuto@maf.or.ke
Maua Methodist Hospital
Box 63, Maua 60600
Igembe, Kenya

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Martin Luther King, Jr.