News
Ministry



Fr. Bernard Fwamba talks to youth in Chelelemuk village in Busia County about the consequences of substance abuse and early pregnancies. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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On a recent Monday morning during a weekly youth group meeting, Kevin Otieng sat in a blue plastic chair outside St. Mary Immaculate Chelelemuk Catholic Church in this sprawling town on Kenya's border with Uganda.

After years of living homeless and with drug addiction, Otieng attends these sessions with other young people who have experienced addiction or teen pregnancy. Here and at other sites, groups of 20 to 30 people share ideas on how to help others youths and develop life and business skills.

"I was lost in drugs at the age of 17 years because my friends told me it eases stress," said the 21-year-old, who is pursuing a college education.

In July, Fr. Bernard Fwamba, the presiding priest of St. Mary Immaculate, rescued Otieng from the streets of the Chelelemuk village, where he was using illegal drugs such as bhang (cannabis), alcohol, glue, miraa (or khat, a weedy plant chewed for stimulative effects) and tobacco.

Otieng said he grew up with a single parent after his father abandoned his mother for another woman, and that his life challenges led him to start abusing drugs to forget his problems.



Young people in Chelelemuk village in Busia County meet to discuss issues affecting them, including drug abuse and teen pregnancy. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"My father kicked us out of his compound, and we had nowhere to go," he recalled, adding that he also couldn't afford to attend school. "This really stressed me out, and I had to use drugs to cope with the stress I was going through."

The priest paid for Otieng's treatment and a three-month daily program, as well as a skills-based education on resisting peer pressure and drugs. The church later sponsored his education.

Fwamba runs the program, assisted by catechists and laypeople, in his parish and another 12 sub-parishes. Fundraising and donations support their work.

Church intervention

Otieng is among hundreds of youths from Chelelemuk, a remote mountainous settlement in Busia, and neighboring villages Fwamba says they have rescued from drug abuse. The leaders also educate girls about the impact of early pregnancies to

try to reduce teen pregnancies in the region.

Government officials told Global Sisters Report that the church's intervention has improved the lives of hundreds of young people: People are now flooding the church to seek guidance and counseling, they said.



Sr. Mary Otieno, a member of the Little Sisters of St. Francis, talks to young people in Chelelemuk village in Busia County about the effects of early pregnancies and encouraging them to abstain from sex until marriage and to finish their education. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"The support I have gotten from the church has really helped me," said Otieng, who is pursuing a diploma course in automotive engineering at Sang'alo Institute of Science and Technology in Kenya. "The church leaders continue to counsel and guide me whenever I come home from college. The church sometimes fundraises for my school fees, which motivates me to want to become an important person."

Fwamba said that many youths are depressed and turn to drugs, especially bhang, and that girls are also dropping out of school because they are pregnant. "We are reaching out to our youths and teaching them Christian values," he said.

Sr. Mary Otieno, a member of the Little Sisters of St. Francis who has worked with the priest about a year, said "a lot of youth are engaging in premarital sex, which is disadvantaging them. When a girl falls pregnant, it means they have to drop out of school, or even if they remain in school, their performance won't be good."



On the streets of Kisumu in western Kenya, a homeless boy carries toxic glue — a common choice of drug among youths. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

According to a 2022 study by the National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse, nearly a quarter of the population of western Kenya (including Busia County) is hooked on drugs and illicit brews such as chang'aa, a traditional home-brewed spirit popular in Kenya. Officials say people make chang'aa more dangerous by adding substances like methanol to it.

The survey found that Busia is among the leading counties in the sale and consumption of illicit brews, with 87,000 liters annually. The report further shows that officials recovered 10,400 kilograms of bhang in western Kenya between September and December 2022, in western Kenya. The largest amount, 800 kilograms, was recovered in Busia.

The deputy governor of Busia County, Arthur Papa Odera, blamed the rise in drug abuse on porous border points, adding that idleness, poor morals, poverty, peer pressure, parenting and social media contribute to the problem.

"These are serious problems that threaten the future of our youth," Odera told GSR. "They require concerted efforts by both government leaders and stakeholders. And to succeed, we must address issues that promote these evils and deal with the remedial side."



Arthur Papa Odera, deputy governor of Busia County, participates in a tree-planting activity at Kolait Boys Boarding Primary school in Busia County. Odera is working with religious leaders to fight drug abuse and teen pregnancy. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Otieno, who with other sisters runs a small health clinic outside their Chelelemuk convent, said many pregnant teens and young mothers visit the clinic daily. Teen pregnancy is widespread in the region and Busia County; 21 percent of the county's teenage girls have been pregnant, compared with the national figure of 18 percent. The fertility rate for girls 15-19 is 13 percent in Busia County, compared with the national rate of 10 percent.

"At the hospital where I normally work, I get the chance to interact with many young mothers," Otieno said. "They narrate their stories to me of how they don't know what to do with pregnancies and the children they will deliver at our facility."

Support and education

Since January 2022, Fwamba, Otieno and others have reached out to youths in schools, homes, streets, churches, and other public gatherings to urge them to stay away from abusing substances and engaging in premarital sex.

Fwamba primarily deals with youths who are addicted to drugs, while Otieno talks to young girls to create awareness of the impact of early pregnancies.

Fwamba said that when he came to the parish in July 2022, he realized substance abuse and pregnancy were ruining the lives of teenagers, preventing them from pursuing their education and, in the case of drugs, resulting in poor health and death. He decided to create groups in sub-parishes — such as youth groups, young and pregnant mothers' groups, children's groups, men's and women's groups — to address the issues.

The church started by training a few people, especially the youths, who would help them advocate against the use of drugs and early pregnancies to their peers and the community, he said. During the weekly training, the youths can ask questions, share challenges and discuss possible solutions.

"I decided to engage parents because they needed to be reminded that their children's future depended on the decisions they made today," he said. "I encouraged parents to interact with their children so that they can know what's affecting them."

The church pays fees for those who want to return to school or pursue skill training for those who want to work and provide for their families.



A sign stands near St. Mary Immaculate Chelelemuk Catholic Church in western Kenya. The church's presiding priest and others are working with young people to lower the use of illegal substances and to educate them about teen pregnancy. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"During the holiday season, we also engage the youths in sports and community work to keep them busy, especially those from schools and colleges," Fwamba said. "To those who stay here, we engage them in economic activities like table banking, poultry farming and small-scale businesses like selling food like tomatoes and vegetables."

Meanwhile, Otieno visits schools, homes and other gatherings to talk to girls, encouraging abstinence. She said she emphasizes the negative effects of teenage pregnancy and encourages parents to speak freely with their daughters and observe their behavioral changes.

Otieno runs a weekly program where teen mothers and pregnant teenagers attend counseling sessions to talk about their situation, heal and use their experience to educate and motivate others. She's worked with dozens of teen mothers so far.

"The girls trust us [sisters] and are able to open up to us," she said. "This way, we are able to help them if they have a problem."

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Odera praises the church's "wonderful effort and initiative" in counseling and assisting young people. "Their drive and ability to work with the communities is creating a great impact, and I fully support and will continue working with them," he said.

Odera said the county government was ready to help the church, working "closely with all the stakeholders, including government institutions, agencies, the nongovernmental sector and security bodies to ensure we address the problems holistically."

Fwamba plans to reach out to more young people, but said the church doesn't have enough resources to help everyone.

"We desire to help every youth and develop more programs that would benefit them," he said. "But the problem is that we don't have enough resources to actualize that dream."