

The Angola Experience

Mollie Nicholls visited Angola in July 2000. This article was written by her for the Mothers Union 'In Touch' magazine.

Since returning home the mixed memories of my visit seem more settled. Representing the MU in London, I travelled with others from MANNA, SPCK, ALMA, and Bishop Graham Dow; together we shared so much with the Christians of Angola. We stayed in a small hotel in Luanda – the capital of this war torn country. A daily programme of visits was organised for us. We visited the seven churches of Luanda, the schools, and the displaced persons' camps. Sadly, because of the war situation, we were unable to visit Uige, which is the birthplace of the church in Angola and where the majority of MU members are today.

We were taken to four different refugee camps on the outskirts of Luanda, established for 100,000s of displaced people, having left their homes after attacks by UNITA rebel forces. Agencies such as the World Food Programme help with food and medical aid, but *'the hand gets tired after giving for a long time.'* Food and resources are scarce and inadequate. Some refugees seek work on the local farms but pay is only 20 – 50p per day. We saw a huge field of cassava grown for staple food provision and owned by the Church, which employs people from a nearby camp. Children from the camp attend the Church school. At two of the camps we were proudly informed that the MU had sent grants from the Relief Fund (so please keep that money rolling in!).

At one of these camps we met Sister Joanna, a Catholic worker from Argentina with the pastoral care of 30,000 people, and with loving hugs she conveyed her thanks to the MU back home for their help and care. Joanna Razao our MU Worker, who has just completed a year at Selly Oak, visits these camps with her assistant Maria Domingos, and together they seek ways in which local MU members can be of help.

On a typical morning I would travel by car with Joanna's brother Adao, hazard lights flashing, zig zagging at speed between other cars and trucks along the busy dusty roads. There roads were lined with crowds of people; men, women and children, walking, standing, sitting, hoping to sell you anything from a yogurt to a pair of shoes if your car slowed down for just a moment.

There were no trees, no plants, and no animals apart from dogs and chickens.

On arriving at the Church there would be up to 20 MU members and one or two men ready to sing as we went in, numbers increasing to 60 or more during the morning. After singing, prayer, bible reading and a formal welcome address (Adao interpreting for me), I would be invited to share some MU teaching for which they all yearn. The women were thrilled to learn about the Wave of

Prayer, linking MU members in London, Angola, Sierra Leone and Burma. They had never envisaged the 'worldwide' aspect of the MU, and they were very excited to know that Angola had its very own section in the 'World Wide Voices' publication. They too will be linked with Sierra Leone and Burma, and it was a comfort to them to know that these countries have much in common with themselves.

Although the inauguration of Angola as a diocese has been postponed, the MU members were adamant that they wanted confirmation of their link with the MU in London. So it was agreed that there would be a special meeting of MU members, at which I, on behalf of the London Diocesan, would formally propose the formation of an informal link between Angola and London. This I duly executed on the last day of my visit, and all those present voted enthusiastically in favour (some with both hands!). There is still so much to tell you but space does not allow, so please invite me to speak at your branch/deanery or area meeting. Elsewhere you will find an item about the proposed sewing project and how we can help; it's a real challenge, but I know that together we can meet it!

Molly Nicholls