

One cow at a time

by A. F. Kertz

WHAT is a cow worth? In our world, we know what a dairy cow costs and what it is worth. But, in Uganda, the value is quite different as I was to learn. My learning process began last February when my wife emailed me that she had volunteered my services to a cow project in Uganda. When I returned home, I met with a bishop from Masaka, Uganda, who had spoken at our church. He had started a cow project 20 years ago to help families in his diocese to get out of poverty.

This program was open to all in his geographical diocese who would qualify whether Christian, Muslim or a local religion. Five years ago, Micro-financing Partners in Africa (MPA), founded by Sister Toni Temporiti in St. Louis, Mo., began to provide funding for this project. When I visited with the bishop before he returned to Uganda, he asked about what they could do to minimize bull calves (they had been running 60 percent over the last two years), whether they could feed whole cottonseed and when I could come to visit them to help on this project.

Marj Faust from ABS Global helped connect me to their local semen distributor whereby they might access sexed semen. I answered the whole cottonseed question, and my visit was scheduled with MPA personnel during two weeks in October. Prior to this, I arranged visits to two St. Louis area dairy farms for visiting Father George from the Masaka Diocese, Sister Toni and Heather of MPA.

Upon arriving in Uganda, most of our time was spent with Father Peter who manages this project. This project is conducted by the Masaka Diocesan Development Organization (MADDO) as part of its five-component commissions: 1. Livestock, 2. Sustainable agriculture, 3. Environmental protection, 4. Human health (two hospitals, five clinics and a pharmacy) and 5. Human welfare. The cow project encompasses all of these commissions in some way or another. In addition to MPA financing, other organizations and parishes in Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands provide funding.

The spirit of giving

Bred Holstein heifers from western Uganda cost \$800 each. During Lent last year, our parish set a goal of being able to purchase a cow for each of the 40 days. Bulletin briefs, website postings and a school art project spread the message. A corral display was developed by the art class for the back wall of the church with Holstein cow icons that moved from outside to inside the corral as contributions were made. By the end of Lent, 91 cows were purchased. When people saw the measurable value of such a project, they became more willing donors.

But the work doesn't start when the cows are purchased. Countless hours are put into the process by the families

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POST-TRAINING, FAMILIES PARTICIPATING IN THE UGANDA COW PROJECT are ready to house and care for a cow of their own. The project is a "living loan"; the first heifer a family's cow births is passed along to another family on the list.

looking to take part in the cow project.

Families apply for the program and are interviewed. When they are approved, they sign a contract as to what they will need to do. MADDO develops a comprehensive plan for their plot of land.

The plan includes a layout of all plantings: various fruit trees, banana trees, coffee trees, corn, grasses for the cow and various vegetables, all of which are interspersed for intercropping. They also have to build a latrine (if they do not have one) and a simple ingenious hand washing setup.

The land is hand-contoured so that most rainwater will be collected on the land, and a cistern is added for their own drinking water. The whole objective is to develop a self-contained, sustainable agriculture operation which also creates income for family needs and elevates their standard of living. This is a zero-grazing program.

A built-in network

Families and a support group of family members, neighbors and villagers are trained by MADDO staff. This support group provides labor, emotional support, and helps eliminate jealousy and possible sabotage. The supportive group is often composed of farmers themselves who want to qualify to have a cow, too. A similar government program has been tried but had a high dropout rate due to lack of training programs.

The cow housing is roofed and otherwise very open with separate freestalls and an outside exercise corral. One stall has the manger for eating, another stall has a nonconcrete surface for lying down and the other stall is for milking. There is a second-story floor for storage of hay and silage for use during the dry season.

The concrete floor of the cow area is sloped to collect urine for fertilization of plants. Feces are scraped by hand for use in the biogas fermenter, for direct fertilization of plants or for use in a compost pile. A biogas operation costs from \$400 to \$800. It produces methane which is piped directly into the house for a cooking stove top and to a lantern for lighting. This eliminates the need to search for and use scarce firewood, which is then used for cooking, and

greatly reduces or eliminates time used for these functions.

Spreading the wealth

When a calf is born, the farmer raises it until about a year old — if it is a heifer — and then gives it back to MADDO for another farmer on the waiting list. This also repays the original loan, and this is why a heifer calf is so important. The family may also pass along a future calf in exchange for installing a biofuel system on their farm.

Each family uses about two liters of milk for their own nutritional needs and sells the remainder to MADDO Dairy, which provides the family a small but steady income. This income can be especially important to keep younger girls in school and from being married off by the family for economic reasons.

Dairy farmers buy shares of the MADDO-run milk collection centers, and eventually they will own the milk processing plant, too. Currently, 80 percent of the milk is processed into yogurt, and most of that is sold to schools.

One woman we visited has been in the program since 2005. She now has four cows, has raised her children, has upgraded and added onto her house, and is the elected leader of a group which has 46 cows. She was hosting a group of 17 farmers to demonstrate how she makes hay using hand-cut and dried grass with a wooden levered boxed compartment for packing the hay bale. The bale was then tied, carried over to her cow shed and hoisted above to join the other bales already there.

Since the cow project's 1993 inception, 1,487 cows have been given out to farmers with only a 4 percent dropout rate; and that was primarily from family deaths. The cow project is a "living loan" designed to be self-sustaining, and there have been 621 cows provided by MPA over the last five years. But there are still 2,000 families trained and waiting for a cow to begin their journey out of poverty. 🐄



To learn more about the Uganda Cow Project, visit: <http://bit.ly/1A6dGtA>