

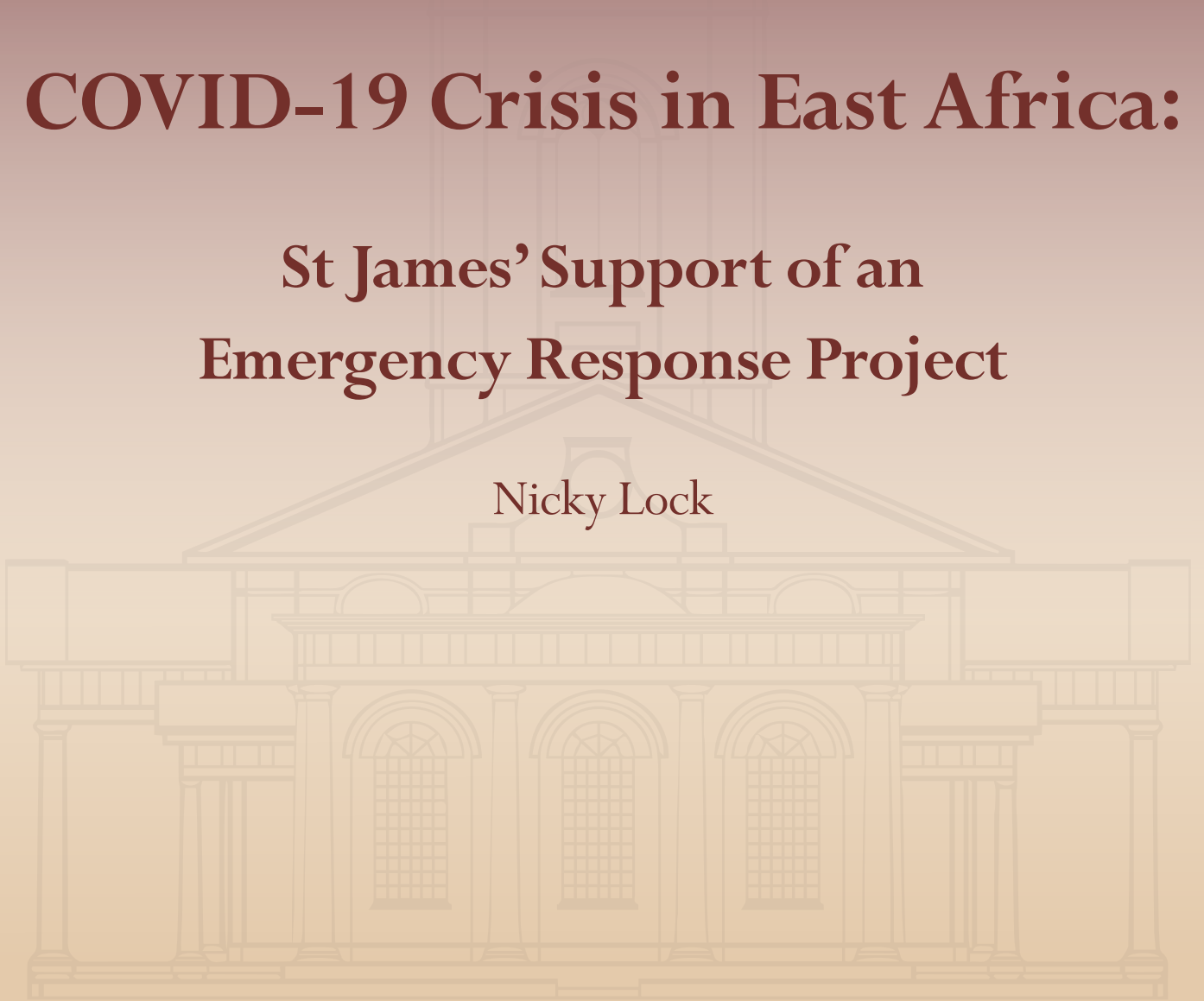
^TST. JAMES'S *Connections*

Bicentenary 2019-2024

COVID-19 Crisis in East Africa:

St James' Support of an Emergency Response Project

Nicky Lock



Extracted Article:
June/July 2020

COVID-19 crisis in East Africa:

Nicola Lock



Nicola Lock with the IFAGE Conference Team in Rwanda, 2019.
Image: <https://ifageinternational.org/events/f/2019-faith-gender-international-conference-report>

The COVID-19 pandemic has left no country worldwide untouched. We in Australia, due to some proactive government intervention, the community's willingness to comply with social and economic restrictions, and our relative wealth, have been impacted far less than many other affluent western nations. Not so in the two thirds world, where economic instability, fragile health systems and lack of good infrastructure prevent dissemination of clear public health messages. Social distancing measures, even where possible, have devastating effects on poverty and food security. St James' has been given the opportunity to partner with an organisation in western Kenya, the Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE) to participate in an Emergency Response to COVID-19 plan which seeks to respond suitably for their situation in Bondo and Rarielda counties,

near the northern shores of Lake Victoria.

For the past three years, I have travelled to East Africa to support Reverend Domnic Misolo in his work battling gender inequality in Kenya and surrounding East African countries. Rev Domnic is an ordained Anglican priest who has devoted his life to the empowerment of women and girls in his region through IFAGE, a registered non-government organisation, that he formed over five years ago. IFAGE works with faith groups and community organisations through empowering faith leaders and women's leaders on gender justice and equality throughout Eastern Africa. Through the work of IFAGE, Rev Domnic is well-networked with leaders in the Anglican church and other churches in his region, working in partnership to deliver education programmes and health promotion programmes.

Rev Domnic is a humble and passionate man, and writes of his own 'conversion' about issues of gender equality, which required him to challenge his traditional upbringing and an evangelical heritage:

I came to know about the need for justice and equality for women and girls during my seminary education at St. Paul's University (Kenya) in the year 2009 when I came across the academic journal about Bible, Faith & Gender. As an Anglican priest, I followed traditional evangelical spirituality that views Scripture (Bible) as authoritative and actual God's breath without criticism. Being moulded in the African culture (Luo Tribe) where women are viewed as inferior and rated with children, my attitude from childhood and in the ministry (as a priest) was heavily influenced by

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that context and worldview. I did not know that my understanding of the Bible was influenced by a patriarchal culture as socializing people and their relationships in the society through male pre-eminence.

I deeply reflected back on my church and life in the community, I was challenged, and my pre-conceived worldview was largely questioned. I started to rethink on the fact that men and women are equal and that can it be true.

The most recent figures from Kenya report a total of 887 COVID-19 cases¹, but a serious shortage of testing due to availability of testing, fear of being forced into quarantine and stigma attached to the virus suggests the actual numbers are likely to far higher. Measures have been put in place to contain the virus: closure of schools, colleges, and international borders, and banning of social gatherings, but in a crowded and poor country like Kenya, the social distancing measures we can adopt in Australia are almost impossible.

As this crisis began to unfold, Rev Dominic wrote to me:

Kindly, I'm writing to you with a heavy heart as fear engulf our families and communities considering possible impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and East Africa – with poor health facilities and crushing (*sic*) economies. Cases of infections and death are being reported in many places across the region, but our hope is in Christ..... I believe we can partner with you and your church to do our best part in a small way, to pray and reach out to needy cases and vulnerable families here in Kenya and East Africa. Kindly, attached find our proposal as an emergency response to the crisis which we request you present to your church.

IFAGE has a well-planned project proposal which has four phases:

- Phase 1: In partnership with local medical/health providers, training and empowering local Public Health Officers, Community Health

Assistants/Volunteers (CHA/Vs), and local Clergy/Faith Leaders, raising awareness, educating on preventive measures, and facilitating reporting of suspected cases.

- Phase 2: Establish hygiene demonstration points where those trained in Phase 1 can show and cement the correct way for handwashing.
- Phase 3: Lead Public Awareness campaigns in the region, run by Phase 1 trainees, to disseminate accurate public health information in villages and towns through use of outdoor broadcasts/speakers.
- Phase 4: Provide Economic Stimulus Package for businesswomen to inject back fresh capital/blood into their businesses after weeks and months of self-isolation and stay-at-home orders. This will enable the women to gain back/resume their businesses and continue providing food and livelihoods for their families.

Impact of gender on effects of COVID-19

In Australia, there have been reports of lockdown conditions worsening the situation for women living with domestic violence. Worldwide, international bodies such as the World Council of Churches have recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on women in countries where there is existing gender injustice². A recent joint statement issued reports that 'the impacts



Image supplied.

¹ East African Community reporting COVID-19 cases, 15 May 2020.

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/global-faith-based-organizations-jointly-call-for-gender-justice-amid-covid-19-response>

of COVID-19 will be hardest felt by women and girls. Worldwide, many people who are enrolled in health care and the related care economy are women. Occupying positions on the frontline makes women more susceptible to the risk of infection. Many people will lose their livelihoods, as already experienced worldwide with the global lockdown. This impacts the service industry and informal sector, where many women work. The closure of schools will impact girls' education now and in the long-term, with an increased risk for child marriage and child labour.'

IFAGE has shown how it can respond to local conditions and, due to Kenya's early lockdown orders, Phases 2 and 3 were curtailed sooner than planned. Concerning the local crisis, IFAGE has shown flexibility by identifying and responding to two more areas requiring support:

- Very vulnerable families who are not able to find food. IFAGE has identified 500 households of the elderly and most underprivileged families that need immediate food assistance.



Image: Nicola Lock

- Responding to increased cases of domestic violence. IFAGE is providing a 24/7 hotline to the community health volunteers and clergy so they can report cases of domestic, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence. This will be connected through police/security offices and children office departments.

An approach was made to the St James' Mission and Outreach Committee for funding to support Rev Dominic's project in rural western Kenya. The committee's timely and enthusiastic response to the request is enabling us as a parish, out of the relative wealth of St James' resources, to partner in a small way with Rev Dominic and his team, as they respond to the COVID-19 crisis in a developing region in East Africa. When Rev Dominic heard that the \$5000 grant was on its way he replied:

Please thank you so much [for] this donation and we are most grateful! I've informed my staff and executive board about this and we all feel very thankful for this great donation and your connection for this consideration. We plan to start working on these [new] activities as early as next week.

Here is Rev Dominic delivering food stuffs to one of the first recipients. Rev Dominic writes 'Today we visited this lovely woman! She lost both of her two hands and one leg to a chronic wound. She also lost her three grown up children. She purely depends on people's donations and support. At a time like this with lockdowns due [to] Covid-19, such physically challenged persons need our love and prayers.'

I will be keeping in touch with Rev Dominic and the project: you can keep in touch through the IFAGE website: ifageinternational.org/, and FaceBook page, www.facebook.com/ifageinternational/. Please keep this region in your prayers: that they will be protected from the ravages of the virus and that food security is maintained, domestic violence kept in check, and for the effectiveness of the IFAGE team as they seek to ameliorate the impact of the virus on this impoverished region.

Nicola Lock is a Parishioner at St James'.



Image supplied.

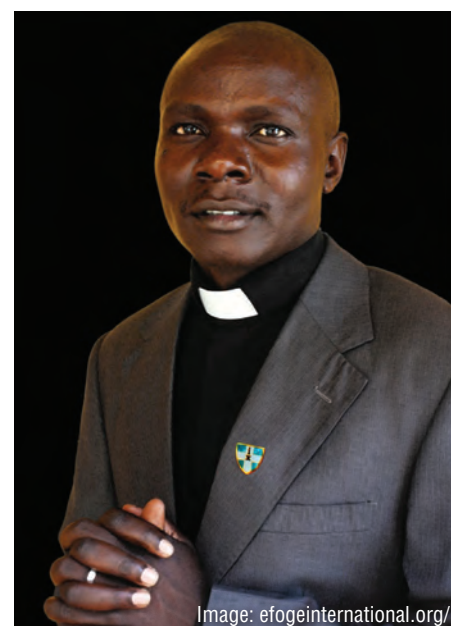


Image: efoageinternational.org/

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sjks.org.au/church/our-story/parish-connections/