

Bishop McAllister College is finally, fully open

BY PAUL JEFFRIES

Late last year, we had been given reason to believe that schools would be allowed to open in January. I worked hard to keep my hopes and expectations under control, and only allowed myself some cautious optimism.

After the many times our hopes got fuelled by rumours and false stories over the past two years, I would like to think I learned my lesson. Don't listen to rumours or believe everything someone in the ministry of education says (or leaks).

Only one person in Uganda would ever make that decision — the same person who closed schools.

On New Years Eve the president announced schools would open Jan. 10, and the 7 p.m. curfew would be lifted Jan. 24, allowing the night economy to reopen.

Things like bars have been effectively closed for two years, but even restaurants, and supermarkets had to be closed by 6 p.m. to allow workers to get home.

I'm not sure my life has changed much, but just the same it feels good to have all the restrictions lifted.

The school is now fully open, and it is wonderful. I don't expect any further closure; we will simply be expected to cope with what comes.

It was a busy few days trying to organize the school, call teachers back (some haven't taught in two years) and prepare them for what is to come.

Workshops were quickly organized as brief refresher courses, but also to prepare teachers for the remedial work that would be necessary, potential discipline issues they might face amongst their students, and how they might address them.

We were told to expect a dropout rate of up to 30 per cent due to teen pregnancies, early marriage, work, low morale and loss of interest in pursuing education.

The good news is that things have gone more smoothly than we expected. We are now in our third week, and things are pretty much back to normal.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BMC recently held its first vaccination clinic, and now other schools are seeking guidance in how they organized it; Assembly time at BMC; Teacher workshops were necessary to bring everyone back up to speed on the realities of operating a school in a pandemic; Most of the main compound renovations were completed just in time for reopening.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

At Bishop McAllister College, we experienced a 20 per cent dropout rate, but in some areas it has been as high as 50 per cent. This is pretty much a rural issue where children face greater hardships and challenges.

Our main school (secondary) enrollment is 515; Seminary (primary) 100; theology (non residential) 80 students.

Government officials in those areas have been told to go out in their areas and push

children back into school. (In other words, force parents who have liked having their children dig in the gardens or engage in other petty income generating tasks, to send their children back to school).

There are a few differences this year, but not many. The school year has been increased by six weeks; each term is now 14 weeks long. Normally they would be 12 weeks in length.

And last week we had our first vaccination clinic. The

rule is no one is permitted to enter a school unless vaccinated.

So far, the government has not opted to enforce that with regards to older students (staff all had to prove they were fully vaccinated). I was really impressed when the head teacher told me she had organized the clinic.

Generally, most people here wish to be vaccinated, but accessing the vaccine is not easy. The good news is that 89 of

our students were vaccinated (those 18 years and above) and will get their second dose in late February.

Other headteachers are now calling Rev. Patience to find how she manage to pull this off.

So we are off to good start, and excited to be fully operational once again.

The Rev. Canon Paul Jeffries is rector of Bishop McAllister College in Uganda.