

HIGHROAD FOR KZN



Thembane Msomi, left, Notembeko Gama, centre, and Dinkisiwe Mhlongo are three women of a group of 13 who are being helped by the KwaSizabantu Mission to produce enough food to sell and feed the children they support in the Maqhoko valley near Nkandla in Zululand. PICTURES: COLLEEN DARDAGAN

Helping hands turn land into fields of abundance

COLLEEN DARDAGAN

NO LOCAL government officials, no mayor nor municipal manager, but a thriving community which offers a blueprint of how country towns and economies could and should run.

Perched at the start of KwaZulu-Natal's Valley of a Thousand Hills, the KwaSizabantu Mission is a hive of activity as hundreds of people go about the business of meeting the needs of the poor.

Hothouses filled with red, green and yellow peppers for Woolworths, a vast spring water bottling plant, a factory which produces one of South Africa's most successful dairy brands, a shop selling locally grown produce and home-baked German breads and pastries, a school, a clinic, a church, a bank ATM and even a landing strip for the mission's small aircraft.

However, unlike the majority of KwaZulu-Natal's country towns, in this remote rural mission town there aren't any swamping sewerage pipes, piles of litter or potholed roads.

Instead, an air of prosperity pervades the brightly coloured and neatly kept neighbouring villages, where weeded vegetable gardens abound and livestock grazes.

Thousands of folk come to the clinic for spiritual and physical help on a monthly basis, more buy their supplies at the shop and many more

The HighRoad Board is keen to promote solutions to KwaZulu-Natal's rural economic development concerns. When the call came confirming that the Rev Erlo Stegen, head of the highly successful KwaSizabantu Mission near Greytown, was available for an interview everything else was pushed on to the back burner.

The mission is internationally renowned for its success in developing a blueprint for economic

development which has now been duplicated all over the world.

Simple yet effective, Stegen's model works on what he terms 'living according to how God commanded in the Bible'. 'When you see people are poor you help them, when you see they are hungry you feed them.' The mission has a blueprint which the government would be well advised to take note of.



Ralph Stegen files his two-seater German-made aircraft over the thriving KwaSizabantu Mission near Greytown.

attend church on a Sunday, and hundreds of local people are employed on the 300ha farm. KwaSizabantu, which means the place "where people are helped", is the result of the Rev

Erlo Stegen's vision to live as God commanded in the Bible. 'Christ says if you see the poor, help them; if they are hungry, feed them. You can preach the best sermons, but

unless you are living it, it's of no use.' Starting out with a small parcel of land in 1966 the mission now has 300ha of freehold land used for intensive



Zamilé Bengu, head of one of the community gardens in the Maqhoko valley, with her daughter Matabile, says the vision to become commercial growers in the future.

farming. The produce is used for the mission and the excess sold to generate funding. Orchards with kiwi fruit and avocado trees and vineyards, a printing press, a

factory which turns out thousands of bottles of hom made jams and pickles each year... the bakery bakes a minimum of 400 loaves of bread a day, pasta is also

THE MERCURY HIGHROAD THE HighRoad page appears in The Mercury every Wednesday. Stories cover a wide range of issues relating mainly to development in KZN, social responsibility initiatives, economic plans, inner-city renewal. Contact Colleen Dardagan at colleen.dardagan@nl.co.za, or contact her at 031 308 2162



The headmistress of the Domino Ser Vite (Serve the Lord) school at the KwaSizabantu Mission, Dorothy Newlands, and head boy Louis Geldenhuys. The school enrolls children from all over the world and from diverse backgrounds.

produced on site, a dairy and yoghurt production plant and a bottling plant which supplies water and juice for the local and international markets... A simple, effective

blueprint, a solution for South Africa's rural poor. The key ingredient? A focused community labouring selflessly in the service of those less fortunate than themselves.

We're living in paradise...

MOSES, but, with a German accent. There's no other way to describe the 76-year-old Rev Erlo Stegen, founder and driving force behind the successful KwaSizabantu Mission, near Greytown. But that wasn't always the case, as he writes in his book, *Revival Among the Zulus*. "When God called me to preach the gospel, I refused. My motto was, 'Money first, the rest later.'"



STEGEN

But he always loved to grow things. "When I came to this forgotten place - Maqhoko - and the people told me they were hungry I said, 'But why? You are living in paradise.'"

encompass the uThukela valley, "are living in paradise. All they need to do is use their own two hands to plant and tend their gardens, just as God intended. We are living in Africa - no one should starve."

At the lunch table he doesn't sit still, always checking to make sure everyone has enough to eat and drink. And the most difficult task: trying to get this man, whom the locals call uBaba and the women

knelt before in respect, to sit still long enough to take his photograph. Born a South African, of German descent, tall, enigmatic Stegen seems invincible, until he speaks of his six daughters, 17 grandchildren and his late wife, Kay. Tears well as he tells of her long fight with cancer. "My wife was a teacher with vast experience. She helped start our school and our teachers' college. We had no funds. Our first classrooms were scrapped buses. "Here we immediately started with a pre-school and kindergarten. If people are educated they will never go hungry."

'Thanks to uBaba, we have our pride again'

TWO YEARS ago, the director of the thriving KwaSizabantu Mission, Erlo Stegen, responded to a call to continue the work of a Canadian missionary deep in the lush bush on the banks of the uThukela River. Today what was left to crumble and decay is now thriving, providing hope for hundreds of deep rural people. Don Dume worked for many years among the Maqhoko valley clans. He built a school and successfully started a number of community vegetable gardens. But, about five years ago, as the missionary's age advanced he felt compelled to return to Canada, the weeds grew unchecked and choked the gardens and the people, who had looked to him for direction, simply "sat down". Dinkisiwe Gama, leader of a band of 13 women who collectively support 44 children from their community garden, said the small water pumps supplied by Dume broke. "We had no money to fix them, so



Thanks to funding from the KwaSizabantu Mission, electricity has arrived in the Maqhoko valley.

our gardens went down. It was about three years we couldn't grow our vegetables." None of the women have husbands and Gama alone is eligible for a pension while one other is collecting the R250 social grant for her three children. "Most of the children we look after are not ours, their parents collect the grants and they take the money". Robert Mpanjana, a student who had worked alongside Dume since childhood and was enrolled at the KwaSizabantu Mission school, then approached Stegen for help. Ralph Withthof, who now manages the growing and thriving Maqhoko Development Project, takes up the story: "The Rev Stegen came down here about two years ago and consulted with the tribal elders. Our first priority was for the inkosi to allocate land to the mission to cultivate. Initially they gave us a very small piece of land which has now been extended to 17ha. We have tested various fruit trees and vegetables... Absolutely

everything grows here." Withthof said the tribal elders had asked them to create work. "That's very difficult in a place as remote as this, so we try to make sure the crops are very labour-intensive so we can employ as many of the local people as possible. At the moment we are employing 95 and once we start with pineapples we expect that to go up to about 150," he said.

produce which we market and sell on their behalf. "Ultimately this project has to be self-sustaining and any money paid out by KwaSizabantu for this project has to be repaid," says Withthof. Thatheni Mdlalose, who heads a second community garden, says their aim is to eventually become commercial growers. "During winter we harvested many vegetables. We kept half for ourselves and sold the rest. This is the first time we have been able to afford our own seedlings and seeds to plant in our vegetable garden. We want to get big," she says. Mdlalose said, unlike the KZN Department of Agriculture, Stegen had kept his promises. "In 1986 they (the government) came here. They promised us water and electricity. We got nothing. Since uBaba (father) Stegen came our children don't fall asleep at school because their stomachs are full. We have money and we have our pride again."