

A Mission Journey

By Gordon A Kloehn

I've been to Africa.

This awesome missionary journey ranks as one of the top highlights of my life. As a pastor and USAF Chaplain for over 40 years I've experienced many. This trip began as a challenge issued by the retired pastor from Abbotsford, British Columbia who had once been the Director of Evangelism for the Lutheran Church of Canada. His challenge was to go with him to Africa to help train 300 Tanzanian Pastors. A possible mission trip to Africa had been a decade long thought since a couple from my parish became lay missionaries in the Ivory Coast;

So I asked my wife if she would like to go to Africa. She responded, "if you want to go to Africa, you have my blessing." After a couple days of reflection on her response, I did decide to accept the challenge. Then God turned this mission trip into an awesome, life changing, spiritual journey as well. I came back having received much more than I gave. I am grateful to God for blessing me with this awesome experience. I don't think I can be the same person I was.

The Mission

Seven pastors, a parish nurse, two businessmen, and two family members from the US and Canada went on the mission. Under the leadership of Pastor Karl Keller from Canada, funds had been raised to support a week long training seminar for 300 Tanzanian pastors. Without outside support these pastors would not have the means to gather for a conference. The seminar week was followed by an evangelizing trip to a remote area in Southwest Tanzania. Sponsored and accompanied by the newly elected Lutheran Bishop of the Northern Tanzania Diocese, we participated in a series of crusades held in several cities communities. The area was considered less developed and had been minimally evangelized by the Lutheran Church of Tanzania.

Personal Impressions

My first blessing was to be with a team of dedicated, praying people with a passion for heeding the great commission of Jesus to reach the lost. We were going to support and to encourage Christians and pastors with this same passion. A second blessing was to find these African Christians a welcoming gracious people so alive in their faith and deeply committed in their service for Christ. The Spirit of God was strongly present and moving mightily in the Lutheran Church of Tanzania.

There is a hunger and need for the Word and a desire to represent and live that Word among those who have it. My first night in Africa the taxi driver taking us to the hostel where we would stay asked why we had come to Kenya. When told we were just passing through to Tanzania on a mission to share the gospel, he said "don't you think when you come into a country you should preach there first before going on. After all we need the Gospel in Kenya too."

I had just left a country where many feel consciences have grown cold and many regard Christians as radical, right wing nutcases. I came there as a pastor from a church body about to go into convention burdened with concerns for the direction the church would take in electing its leaders, bogged down in the proper interpretation of its by-laws, divided over with whom it is appropriate to pray and associate, and how to fund its operational and legal expenses due to income shortfalls. Cutting back on world missions was one solution.

We came as missionaries to share with a people and their pastors. We found ourselves a team with people whose first priority was praying and seeking God's will and blessing in our activities. Everything first began after a time of prayer.

Our next night, a Saturday, was spent at a Luther Hostel in Tanzania where we attended a small group prayer and ministry meeting held there by Pastor Justin Offoro who was the pastor responsible for arranging and organizing our "mission." He was the chaplain at the hostel and the pastor of a parish that met there. The entire family, adults and children, a total of approximately 20, meet weekly with each other to have a meal and to strengthen each other in the faith. The emphasis was on the importance of strong family altars as key to the church and its ministry. In 2 Kings we learn Israel became weak upon losing its altar and strong when regaining their altar. I came back determined to strengthen our family altar.

Sunday morning we were bussed to the service of celebration honoring the retiring bishop in his home community. We had a rough hour ride on unimproved roads through villages with many

people walking the roads to attend their church. Suddenly the narrow, unimproved trail like road ended at a huge church that seats 2000 people. There must have been nearly 4000 people there inside and outside the church. The grounds were full of people, tents, chairs, tables, and women cooking. We could plainly see Mt Kilamenjaro from the church grounds.

What a spectacle! - A five-hour service. The service started at 10 am and ended after 3:00 followed by a feast for the attendees. As distinguished visitors from the US and Canada we were ushered to reserved pews in front and provided translators. The Prime Minister of Tanzania attended the service. His entourage included Members of Parliament. They were seated in front of us on chairs with other dignitaries.

What amazed me was the presence of hundreds of well-behaved children attentively sitting through the ceremony. Back home adults begin to squirm and rock as a service approaches the sixty-minute mark. The worship and crusade services were usually three hours. The shortest service we attended was two hours at a church that had 8:00 and 10:00 am Sunday services. The second service started late.

In Africa Christians gathering together as neighbors to worship is an extremely important social and cultural event. In our culture many don't even know their neighbors. Upon arriving home from work or the gym or golf they press a button in the car to open and close their garage doors. Then they isolate themselves by spending the next couple hours in front of a video screen, a computer screen, or a television screen while eating take out or a delivered pizza. In Africa people walk miles to gather with Christian family around the Word.

New Perspectives and Priorities.

For me this trip became an epiphany in terms of personal priorities and perspective on what is really important. Tanzania is a third world country. The per capita income is about \$30 a month. The infrastructure is lousy and primitive. We stayed at times in facilities without running water and without electricity. We took a few cold showers. We washed up in buckets and rinsed our clothes in sinks. I did get some bug for a couple days that made access to toilets that flush a concern. Often there weren't any.

But we were in a country in an area, where the majority of the people live in homes or huts without electricity, without running water, without kitchens. Outside of the cities we saw the boys herding the livestock, cattle or sheep or goats or buffalo. We saw women balancing five gallon buckets of water they had walked two or three kilometers to get. Often it was dirty water from an irrigation ditch or stream. We saw girls doing laundry in creeks. We saw people gathering sticks for the fires outside their houses over which they cooked their food in pots.

These scenes would have been familiar to Jesus and to Elijah. We were among people who could only imagine how rich we in America are to have houses with pipes that bring in water, toilets that flush, electric or gas stoves to cook on. We drive cars to work or Walmart on roads that are paved. We are rich!! "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." Ps 103:2

Evangelism Crusades

Following the week training seminar for the pastors we flew with Missionary Aviation to a remote area called Rukwa for a series of evangelistic crusades. We accompanied the Bishop. Twenty years earlier as the Director of Missions for the Northern Diocese the bishop sent a pastor to a city called Mpanda. He had responded to a request by a small group of Lutherans there for a pastor. Now there are four churches. Now as bishop he wanted to spread the Word.

The bishop had assembled a brass band of 101 musicians and a team of Tanzanian evangelists and pastors and included our team from the US and Canada. We divided into three teams. We would enter our assigned communities preceded by a brass band to a church or field where the crusade would be held. As we paraded through the community hundreds of children and adults would join us and followed us to the area of the crusade.

My group went for three days to the church on a decade old Hutsu Refugee Settlement occupied by people who fled the Rwanda genocide wars. It was a miraculous experience to watch the gathered multitudes participate attentively in the service. Many who tentatively watched and listened on the fringes would later be drawn in and would later respond to the call for prayers and/or to commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

I compare our role on the team to that of the celebrity sports star, singer, or movie star that speak as guests at Billy Graham type events. We departed after the final meal. The roasted goat

with head still on was presented to the bishop. We received gifts. We were being highly honored for sharing Christ.

We then went by bus to Sumbawanga, a city where many area people are involved in witchcraft. The group to which I was assigned went into a rural village where we had a church. We again had a parade into the village preceded by the brass musicians. A crowd of villagers followed. Our evangelist counted 146 bicycles. Remember we were in an area where any means of transportation beside feet are a rare luxury. We preached at a teaching seminar for the congregation in the morning and at a crusade in the afternoon. Again many committed themselves to Christ including people attired in Muslim garb. Several women involve with witch doctors were taken aside for prayer seemingly possessed by demons.

Of special interest for me was to see the many children scatter when my teammate, Rev Gunderson, and I approached them. I had made a practice during our mission of shaking hands, high fiving, and giving gifts to the children. Then our evangelist and translator asked in Swahili how many had ever seen a white man before. Only a few of the older children raised their hands. But by the end of the day we were "babu" which is Swahili for Grandpa or papa.

Reflections

We went to serve and encourage dedicated Christian pastors and people through whom the Holy Spirit and the hand of God are working mightily. Miraculous works are being done. At the crusades our team's members were involved with healings as well as exorcisms. Particularly among those practicing witchcraft demon possession would manifest itself when the person was asked if they wanted to commit their lives to Jesus. I saw them begin to shake and heard screams. The Tanzanian evangelists and pastors for whom these experiences were common would take them off to pray for and with them.

The church leaders are very concerned about the break down in family values they see in America, the acceptance of homosexuality as an alternate behavior, the movement toward same sex marriages, the increasing divorce rate. They are seeking ways to deal with the problem of 2-3 million of their countryman infected with the AIDS virus and the 50,000 orphans left by those who died. They are seeking to serve the aging, to provide schools to educate children, and to provide medical services in remote areas.

Their financial resources are so limited. The pastors are receiving about \$50 per month. My teammate from Yakima, Washington, who was involved in a healing of a paralyzed woman, became aware of the fact that the pastor in the town where he went on a crusade had not been paid for two months due to the lack of resources. His salary was \$15 a month.

The Africa church is growing rapidly. Pentecost is still being experienced. Thousands are coming to know the Savior. Congregations are being formed and churches are being built faster than pastors and evangelist can be found to serve them. Our team leader became aware of a pastor attempting to serve a number of these congregations. His ministry was being hampered because his motorbike was broke. Walking was the only means he had to get to his scattered churches. His motorbike needed \$160 worth of repairs. Two of our Canadian pastors gave him the \$160 on Thursday. On Sunday he proudly rode the repaired motorbike to the church where we were worshiping to show his benefactors.

I talked to a retired pastor after one of my workshops who had not received his \$48 pension from the diocese for two months because of the lack of funds. When I asked him how he got by, he said, "on Wednesday I'm going to harvest maize." There are 30 retired pastors in the diocese. A \$2900 gift to the diocese could catch them up.

These people are aware of God's gift of abundance and prosperity to our nation. They weren't really asking, but a message I perceived was any help received would be deeply appreciated. The recent (June/July issue) of The Lutheran Witness had a report by the Director of LCMS World Relief. He was promoting their "Barnyard Buddies" program. He told an anecdote about getting stuck on a muddy road. Suddenly one of the Kenyan pastors appeared at the window of their vehicle. This pastor served six churches and was walking that road for six miles to serve one of them. The Kenyan pastor made \$12 a month. The "Barnyard Buddies" program of LCMS World Relief was set up to purchase a cow for \$100 to help our Kenyan pastors such as this one survive. Check out the article.

After my "mission" to Africa, I now think we all need to buy a cow.