



Under the Southern Cross

March 2008

An African proverb tells us that 'if you go alone you can go fast but if you go together you can go far.' The last week of February and first week of March a group of 13 Presbyterians came to South Africa and Malawi to learn first hand about AIDS in Southern Africa. They spoke with church leaders and with ordinary members, both of whom live day by day with the reality of AIDS. The visit was a collaborative effort of the Peacemaking Office, the Presbyterian AIDS Network and the International Health Ministries Office. One of the questions the group pondered during this visit was this, if we are in fact all children of the same God, what is our responsibility to our brothers and sisters in Africa who are living with the HIV virus and the tragedies it can cause? How can we, as PC(USA), travel with our partners in Southern Africa so that we can 'go far' in making a difference in people's lives? As the group went home, they had a lot to process and I suspect more questions than answers to consider over time. For me, it was interesting to see my friends and colleagues with whom I have worked for almost 6 years now, people I have come to care about very much, through new eyes. At first, I wondered about how jaded I had become not to be overwhelmed by the poverty and the pain of the people we met and those we saw along the road. Then I realized that it is not a matter of being jaded or even simply used to it but that I have somehow learned to make my peace with it or otherwise, I would never be able to do my work. However, looking back over the years I realized that there are those individuals and instances when I am still blind-sided and deeply touched.



Martha Zgambo Nyrongo

I came to know and appreciate Martha in her role as the deputy coordinator of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Synod of Zambia AIDS Program. At the same time she was on the executive committee of the Synod as well as being the deputy coordinator of the Education Department. She was a brilliant woman with many interests and commitments. In the few years we worked and traveled together

we talked and laughed and schemed and dreamed about how things could be better for the people of Zambia, especially the children. However, before dawn on the 25th of February she lost her fight with a complicated case of heart disease and died. Word came to me at 5:30 a.m. via sms, a cell phone messaging system that is very common here. She has left a huge gap in the programs of the CCAP Synod of Zambia but more than that in the hearts and lives of her family and those of us who were privileged to know her as a colleague and friend.

6 Weeks of Travel Zambia

The second week of January and the second week of February found me in Zambia. The first stint turned out to be an exercise in patience and flexibility when I realized that what I had expected to do was not going to happen as planned. In the end, Costin Mwale, AIDS Coordinator of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Synod of Zambia and I were able to lay out plans for 2008 and begin the process of writing proposals for funding. This year will be both intensive and exciting and without Martha, very challenging.

In April/May I plan to spend several weeks in Zambia to help with two workshops for home-based care volunteers and at least one for pastors and their partners. The workshops for home-based care volunteers will be the first and second in a series of training events that will not only teach our new volunteers the basics of being a carer, but will also be a time when volunteers of long standing can come and be a part of the training, done by outside professionals, then take a day to look at what content from the training was the most significant for new volunteers and how they could 'package' that information so that they themselves will be able to train new volunteers in their areas.

The workshop/retreat for pastors and their partners will look at stress and self-care in the lives of the pastors and their partners. Over the years I have asked many pastors how AIDS is

affecting their communities and their own lives. It was clear that for many pastors it has become an overwhelming situation. From talking about the workshop/retreat with several of the participants, they are looking forward to this event. Another aspect of the workshop/retreat is to help the pastors and their partners see the importance of being tested for HIV themselves.

6 Weeks of Travel Malawi

In between the times in Zambia I was in Malawi. My thinking was that it might be more cost effective to go from Zambia to Malawi rather than coming back to South Africa in between the two visits. In the end there was not that much difference in plane fares and it would have been nice to have a break in between the two countries. It was, what they call, a learning experience.

In Malawi I visited all three Synods of the CCAP in Malawi. In Blantyre to get a better sense of how the AIDS program is fitting in with the new structure of the Synod; in Nkhoma to meet with the new director of their AIDS program and in Livingstonia to visit some of their projects, especially the micro-finance groups and the new Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) mobile clinic that they have initiated.

The micro-finance groups of village savings and loans are fascinating especially in the difference they have made in the lives of the predominantly women who are involved. Each week the members buy shares and when the kitty reaches a pre-agreed amount, they lend the money to each other at an interest rate of 15-20%. The amount borrowed seems to be used to start small businesses and other income generating activities and there is a good rate of repayment on the loans. At the end of the year, there is a payout to all the members according to the number of shares bought. These funds have been used for home improvement and paying school fees among other things. One of the interesting impacts that these groups have on the lives of the women is that they are empowered by having their own access to funds and in some cases are given more respect from their husbands. It has also reduced the rate of transactional sex.

Interpretation Assignment

Plans for coming back to the US later this year are falling into place. Towards the end of July I will go to Mexico City for the International AIDS Conference. That should put me back in the US sometime around the middle of August. I will be there for a total of 3 months, returning to South Africa sometime the end of October. During that time there will be 2 or 3 meetings I will need to attend but the bulk of the time will be for speaking in churches. If you would like me to come visit your church, please let me know by the end of April so that I can work out a schedule, visiting congregations in the same areas at the same time.

Easter Blessings

Several years ago I visited the Iona Community in Scotland. It is a place where someone once said 'the veil between heaven and earth is thin', a place where seekers come to find or renew their relationship with God and to contemplate what that means for their relationships with the world and with others. George McLeod, the founder of the community once said:

"I simply argue that the Cross should be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles; but on a cross between two thieves; on the towns' garbage heap; at a crossroad, so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek... at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died. And that is what He died about. That is where 'Christians' ought to be and what 'Christians' ought to be about."

This Easter as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and gaze on the 'cross between two candles' let us also remember and not be afraid to go stand beneath the 'cross between two thieves'. As we celebrate the resurrection of the Prince of Peace let us pray for a resurrection of peace in our world.

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