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Africa 1: The Story of Jakaranda, a Church Named after a Tree

by Wilmoth Foreman

[Today's column is the first in a series about a July 15-August 1 mission trip to Kenya, Africa; I tagged along as one of a 14-member team from First Presbyterian Church in Nashville. The events herein are from the middle of the trip because, with jet lag factoring in heavily, this is the easiest story to tell.]

On the eastern coast of Africa, toward the south, lies Kenya. Nairobi, with its modern-big-city hustle and bustle, is located there.

Several molar-rattling miles from Nairobi live a people in touch with their past, yet also seriously invested in their future -- the congregation of Jakaranda Presbyterian Church.

One thing that sets this church apart is its origin. When the people decided to form a congregation, they had no building, so began meeting under a large Jakaranda [they spell it with a "k"] tree. This tree served as their church home until, a few years back, they erected a small, serviceable building.

"We molded the bricks ourselves from the dirt around here," a member explained, "then painted them with sand." A close inspection of the results shows clay-red concrete-block-sized brick muted by a cream-colored sand crust.

As the congregation grew, it needed a larger church, but had no money to finance it. The decision was made to cut their "home" tree and sell its lumber to pay for a foundation.

By Sunday, July 17, 2005, that foundation was poured beside the huge stump of the sacrificial tree. The congregation was told, "Next Sunday is the dedication."

"Of what?" they asked.

By the time our mission team arrived onsite the following Wednesday, a see-through steel frame was in place, looking almost fragile in its sparseness. Our job for two days was to work in partnership with congregation members toward completing their Mabati [steel frame and metal siding] church.

One team member who had helped erect other Mabatis quipped, "What will we do the second day?"

The construction-oriented among us quickly divided into two teams. Starting at opposite sides of the framework, they raced each other while attaching metal side panels. The air was alive with the sound of zoom-zooms [battery operated power screwdrivers] and good-natured taunts.

Two of our ladies began painting the yet-to-be-hung front doors a robin's egg/aqua that we came to refer to as Presbyterian blue. The rest of us painters were not having as much luck. The foondies [skilled craftsmen] were covering a two-foot-high concrete wall around the bottom of the church with mortar. Their wet red mortar did not co-exist well with our attempts to paint adjacent metal windows white.

In spite of such setbacks, by the time the ladies of the church announced our mid-morning Tea Time, the place had begun to look like it might become a building.

By day's end, four walls were in place, and several windows painted.

On Thursday, as our van pulled within sight of the emerging church, almost in unison we exclaimed, "The roof is on!"

Actually, only half of the roof, but we were encouraged. Onward, painting where and when we could. Ladders were at a premium. Yet, after the cross at the front of the church was already hung, some church member wanted it painted guess-what blue, so FPC minister Sandra Randleman got busy on that job.

That afternoon, we left with promises to our new friends that we would be there for the Sunday dedication -- and with wonderments about the building's completion.

"We've never missed a deadline yet," project manager Stu Ross assured us.

His prediction proved accurate. On Sunday morning, the interior was not red and white speckled and the immaculate grounds looked as if they had never been touched by construction clutter.

Throughout the service, our mission team members were treated as guests of honor. Ahead of time, we met with the ministers and elders in the small previous-church building. Then, led by an elder carrying the pulpit Bible, we processed through the congregation to the new Mabati.

As the ceremony proceeded, the moderator of the Presbytery blessed the building, the pews, the pulpits, and other worship-related tangibles.

The service, counting time in the makeshift vestry, lasted three hours and 15 minutes. It featured choirs; prayers; speeches of appreciation; an auction where bananas, pineapples, mosquito nets, and other donated items were bid on to raise money for needed furnishings; and a sermon that swung back and forth between English and Kikuyu.

As we said our goodbyes, one elder told me, "We will be changed. We have seen your young and old working together." He added, "Our ministers stand back and watch. Yours worked."

We too were changed. With new friendships and new appreciations.

[to be continued]

Her first novel, SUMMER OF THE SKUNKS, is available in bookstore and on Amazon.