

Somewhere Along the Way column  
for Sunday, August 14, 2005

Africa 2: Where we were and why; learning to-do's and taboos  
by  
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*[Today's column continues a series about a mid-summer mission trip to Kenya, Africa; I tagged along as one of a 14-member team from First Presbyterian Church in Nashville. Reminder: these write-ups, based on memories and hastily scribbled notes, represent one person's perspective/observations.]*

Early the Sunday morning after our late-night arrival, I took a cup of coffee outside, eager for my first daytime view of Kenya.

I forget what I expected, but I now know why the movie *Out of Africa* begins with fog on the horizon. As far as the eye could see, muted by morning mist, were edged lawns and flower beds; sculpted hedges; an acre-plus vegetable garden that ought to be beautifying the cover of major magazines.

We were housed on the grounds of a Presbyterian hospital complex. Within its confines were several homes, the rambling hospital building, and guest facilities. Manicured landscaping softened the cold-steel facts of heavy entrance gates opened only at the discretion of around-the-clock guards. Other guards patrolled the compound 7/24.

Even within that safety net, doors were seriously padlocked and windows barred.

After breakfast—would we ever get used to the hot milk furnished for our coffee “cream?”—we piled into a 14-passenger van—15, counting the driver. That vehicle was so basic to our ventures, its capacity had determined the number in our mission group.

Speaking of mission—we did have a reason for being there. Our projects were to work in partnership with local congregations to help build school classrooms at the Embul-bul church; work on construction of the Gaitumbi stone church that First Presbyterian Nashville is funding; and help build the Jakaranda Mabati [steel frame and metal siding] church.

As I understand it, churches serve not only as worship centers in Kenya. Since the government will send teachers wherever there is a building, having a church building qualifies a community for available education resources.

The demand is so great, the next step is to add classrooms to accommodate the overflow of students.

Fortunately for us jet-laggers, since it was Sunday, we were headed to Embul-bul for a morning of worship rather than work.

Even early on a Sunday morning with most of the roadside kiosks closed, walkers were everywhere. First of many faux pas I committed was to wave wrong to the little children. My open-close wave to them was a “come here” sign. The proper “hello” wave is with the open hand, side to side.

En route, the “been there, done that” veterans among us gave additional tips:

“Remember, God is not an American. We didn't bring God with us.”

“Do not take pictures from the vehicle, or of anyone you don't [or do] know, without permission.”

At the Embul-bul site, Nashville FPC folk who had worked on the building in years past marveled at it now being a finished, functioning worship place. And, when the 9:00 o'clock worship service we had hurried to attend began at 10:15, we "newbies" got a dose of the African-versus-American concept of time.

Actually, the discrepancy was not as drastic as it sounds. Each week, that church has three scheduled services in three different languages. Since attendees at the first [English] option were rattling around in the large sanctuary, the elders and [woman] minister chose to combine their first two services.

This gave us guests ample opportunity to get acquainted, or renew friendships, with our hosts.

Again, my vague idea of "what it'll be like" was miles off the mark. A high percentage of the people there not only comprehended, but spoke English, often with an eloquence that put our vocabularies to shame. But their mellow enunciation and vowel variations, for me, required huge concentration to understand.

As the long-awaited service time approached, three young men "stage left" of the sanctuary cranked up a tape on a battery-operated keyboard. Doubtless this "prelude" was in our honor, since it featured a cross-section of American songs including Battle Hymn of the Republic, Grandfather's Clock, Yankee Doodle, Beautiful Dreamer, and Amazing Grace.

After the service, our hosts treated us to what we soon learned was, in that British-heritage area, almost a sacrament in itself -- Tea Time. In conversation, congregation member Sam -- named Samuel because he was a very large newborn and his mother thought he'd be a huge man -- advised, "All you need to know in our language [Kikuyu] is 'Asante sanna.' It means thank you."

We stayed for the first part of the Kikuyu-language service, which almost filled the 500-capacity sanctuary. We were introduced as honored guests. In explaining "our" role in building the church, one speaker said, "You have given us 20 years. It would have taken us that long to accomplish what, with your help, was done in three years."

What a rollicking songfest followed the introductions! As our group left for a "posh" restaurant where we had lunch reservations, one among us observed, "We go to church to improve our faith. They go to celebrate their faith."

*[to be continued]*

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