

## Letters from Overseas

### Karen and Bill Butt Write from Mozambique

February 2009

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Philippians 2:4*



If we all followed this civilized advice from Paul, we'd live in more-civil communities, where each person contributes according to her individual abilities, and is acknowledged for her contributions. By developing solidarity and self-esteem, that's one main aim for the girls in the Christian Council's PEDRA program for girls' education against HIV/AIDS.

In Canada the school year starts near the end of summer, and it's the same in Mozambique—but in February, not September. So the 2009 program has begun. For the last few weeks, girls have been arriving every day to register. They've started showing up at 7 a.m., an hour before PEDRA opens. Some are veterans of the program, with three or four years of experience. Others are new, generally younger; the PEDRA practice is that girls start at age 10.

The program room in Quelimane is jammed—almost 40 girls each morning, over 40 in the afternoons, girls of various age, height, experience, and abilities, from ages 10 to 17. A dozen girls, overflow, work at extra tables set up on the broad veranda, shaded by straw mats.

First step—they make name-tags, as you see in one of the website photos ([www.stpaulsunitedchurch.com](http://www.stpaulsunitedchurch.com)), each writing her name on the foil side of old juice and milk boxes, cut in the shape of butterflies, then decorated with sequin sparkles glued on in patterns according to each girl's taste. The new girls have never worked with glue or scissors, and are learning brand-new skills that take concentration, creativity, and unfamiliar muscle movements. Sparkles are a novelty, and end up decorating faces as well as butterfly name-tags.

They learn to line up by height, and to sing and dance the PEDRA songs and dances that the older girls all have learned, and help to teach the young ones—all with dance-steps and vigorous gestures as you see in the other photo, loud enough to carry across the CCM compound, which doesn't bother the non-PEDRA staff who are used to 30 or so girls around most days. Seeing them in rows from smallest to tallest reminds you how they grow from age 10 to 14—not just in physical shape and size, but in mental stature.

With so many girls this year they're divided in groups of eight or so, each led by a pair of older girls to encourage peer-to-peer learning, the younger girls learning from older role models, and the older girls developing in themselves leadership skills and self-esteem. Group leaders monitor and mentor the others, and help teach classes like cooking, hygiene, and HIV. The older girls also get the privilege of much-sought-after classes in English and computers.

In the rural PEDRA centres, the year starts with a meeting with the parents and community; PEDRA is a community program—as Paul said, people working in the interests of others. Then there's work on the PEDRA gazebo roofs. If they need new thatch, the girls cut and bring long grass from home and install it; they all know how, from working on their own homes.

Then, we have brainstorming sessions on the girls' hopes and plans for the new year. In 2009 they'll be learning to make soap and candles; we've experimented with adding eucalyptus leaves to give a pleasant odour.

Also they're looking forward very much to learning self-defence. Because not everyone they'll meet in life will do as Paul urges.

In mission and service,

Karen and Bill Butt

Karen and Bill Butt are United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with Conselho Cristao de Mocambique in Mozambique. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

