

Letters from Overseas

Karen and Bill Butt Write from Mozambique

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"...you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it."—Mark 11:2



Shortly before his death, Jesus apparently rode a young donkey into Jerusalem. According to artistic tradition (though the Bible doesn't say so), as an infant with his parents fleeing to Africa from Herod, he also went by donkey. At the start and the end of his earthly life, a donkey. In between, as far as we know, in his travels about the Holy Land he went by foot, in sandals. Chariots were for generals and kings, and the wealthy Ethiopian treasurer in Acts 8. Camels were for magi in search of Epiphany (or so we imagine—another unbiblical artistic tradition).

Now, imagine bicycles. The modern bicycle developed only circa 1900; it wasn't available in Palestine year 30. It's the world's most efficient land vehicle in terms of distance travelled, per weight, per energy expended. What if Jesus and his disciples had owned bicycles? How would their work have been different? How might their ministry have grown and spread?

We get a glimpse of an answer by looking at an ongoing project of the Christian Council of Mozambique to provide bicycles to rural pastors and church leaders. Just before Christmas we were in the town of Mopeia in the Zambezi river valley delivering another lot of five bicycles—here you



see the "official" presentation photo. (CCM also gives bicycles to traditional birth attendants.) I asked the pastors and leaders what difference a bicycle—one bicycle—can make in the life of a congregation. Fernanda Jose, who runs a day-care centre at Mopeia's Evangelical Church of Christ, was their spokesperson. Here's some of what she said:

First of all, transporting the sick or pregnant to and from the clinic. Few families own a bicycle, and most families live on average an hour's walk from the nearest clinic. A congregation volunteer responsible for this bicycle mission can save lives.

Transporting materials for the congregation's various activities. Mozambicans are enormously adept at loading up a bicycle and tying it all balanced and secure with rubber straps made from tire tubes, on a broad stick-and-bamboo frame behind the driver's saddle. You see bicycles carrying four people, or a dozen chickens (upside-down on handlebars, or in a wooden cage behind), a goat, a pig, a ladder, three-metre planks, a wooden door, sacks of corn or charcoal or cement, 100-kg bales of dried fish, or boxes of almost anything piled higher than the cyclist's head.

A worship leader getting to a distant church for the service, or any leader getting to a meeting or any other event. The typical rural Mozambican parish has on average about half a dozen congregations, spread across a distance of 30 or more kilometres. A congregational bicycle means someone else besides the pastor can go, and cuts the travel time by 80 percent as compared to walking. A bicycle is light enough to carry across the streams and lagoons in rainy season.

Bicycles. The disciples of Jesus would have loved them. And the magi would have got to the manger faster than by camel.

In mission and service, Karen and Bill Butt

To see more letters, and more photos accompanying this letter, visit www.stpaulsunitedchurch.com.

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.

