

Letters from Overseas

Tiina Cote Writes an Advent Letter from Tanzania

December 2011

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.... So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

Luke 2:8–16 NRSV (selected verses)



Since this Southern Ontario urban person arrived in central Tanzania in East Africa, I have been fascinated by the shepherds and their varied flocks. These pastoralists move their cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys from one food source to another, which is now increasingly scarce at the end of the dry season. Sometimes the best grazing is along the road and even within the cities like Dodoma where I live. That has given me many opportunities to watch one particular shepherd and his small flock of five cows and three goats. This shepherd is a boy of no more than 10 years of age. A few times a week, he moves his little herd from one meagre patch of grass to the other side of the main highway in the city. He stands on the edge of the road in front of his animals. These animals have been entrusted to him for the sustenance of his whole family. He stands there waiting for the traffic to ease, holding one hand out as if a crossing guard at a school playground. He stands still, looking at the cars and buses and trucks, and his animals huddle behind him, watching him intently. And there they stand, as if frozen, as I drive past.



I have never witnessed the symbiotic relationship between shepherd and flock, each depending on the other for life itself, especially in this arid landscape of the sub-Saharan. Observing this kind of a relationship provides a deeper understanding of the remarkable actions by the shepherds in Luke's gospel story of the birth of Jesus. We are told that the shepherds were in the fields outside of Bethlehem. It is nighttime, full of risk and dangers. Shepherds and flock needed each other to survive the night well. Yet, this strange revelation in the night sky experienced by the shepherds was so powerful that they left their source of sustenance in order to seek the unknown.

What possibly could have been strong enough to motivate the shepherds to leave and put themselves and their flock in danger? I wonder, is it the same motivation that I am just beginning to glimpse in the multiple critical ministries of the Christian Council of



Tanzania? Ministries like advocacy and peace building, especially with inter-faith relations and ministries to the youth through University Chaplaincies like the one at the University of Dodoma that I have been called to?

I wonder if it is the same motivation that I have witnessed in the lives of the ordinary people here in Tanzania. Like a student

who buys a stranger a small bag of peanuts when there is not enough money to buy lunch for themselves. Or a man who struggles to provide for his family while caring for a brother in need of long-term medical help in a society with little health benefits and who, brick by brick, also builds a home that will be opened to those in need of extra help to be the best they can be in a society that marginalizes the disabled.

I believe it is HOPE that motivates. HOPE motivated the shepherds in the story, and hope motivates people, churches, and coalitions today. Hope for a new world, a world that God has already imagined and created to be realized into full potential. Not a hope for things or personal gain, but for the indwelling of God among us in ways that transform our abilities to live together as one earth community. This is the HOPE which angels sang and for which the shepherds left their flocks by night. HOPE in the form of a baby who would grow to be the Messiah promised to their people so long ago.

Today, we too seek the same promised HOPE for our world. We seek it through our decisions and actions, like giving to the Mission and Service Fund so that the partnership between the Christian Council of Tanzania and The United Church of Canada can become a light in the shadows that sometimes overwhelm. Our sharing of spirit and wealth allows us to see that though poverty may be staggeringly deep in places, peanuts are still shared and HOPE flickers. Though health and wellbeing is challenged in profound ways, still we can witness HOPE being built, brick by brick.

This Christmas season, may we all make haste to see this God born among us again. Then, filled with the HOPE that is born in the small, remote areas of our hearts, may we return to our fields and streets, villages and cities to share its radiance with others.

Blessings for this sacred season,

Rev. Tiina Cote

To learn more, visit Tiina's blog (<http://calledtotanzania.wordpress.com>) or our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com>).

Tiina Cote is United Church of Canada overseas personnel who serves with the Christian Council of Tanzania. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to The United Church of Canada's Mission and Service Fund.

