

Letters from Overseas

Doug Varey Writes from Zambia

Mulushani—Hello from Zambia,

March 2009

Rev. Douglas Varey checking in from the United Church of Zambia Theological College in Kitwe, Copperbelt Province. The college is located at the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, an international and inter-denomination training centre located about 7 km north of Kitwe, near the heart of Zambia's mining enterprises.

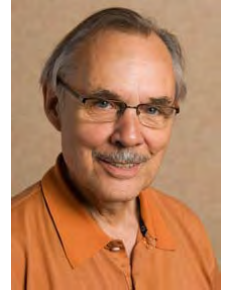


Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky

I am a United Church of Canada mission partner here since January 2008. This is my third and last semester and I will be returning home in May. It has been an important and positive experience for me and hopefully for the students and college. My wife, Lynne Brennan, was with me for my first semester. Lynne has now returned to her teaching position in Toronto. Being together again is one of my primary reasons for returning to Toronto shortly.

Tutor Responsibilities

One of the reasons I extended my stay from two semesters to three was to teach again the three courses I taught in first semester last year. We have seven students in the first year ministerial program, two women and five men. I am introducing them to the Old Testament. The six male students in second year are studying theologies of the New Testament with me, and the eight men and one woman in year three are examining contemporary Christian ethics.

Because books are very expensive, I have chosen type or photocopy materials for each of my courses. This ensures that the students have printed resources to study for the examination and to take with them when they graduate.

Students are required to complete a research paper. Since this is a new experience for some first-year students, I spend time assisting them with their writing style, reviewing several drafts before they submit their final paper. It is amazing how quickly the style and content improves.

This morning, Roy, a third-year student, presented a fine paper on Christianity and Global Warming. His presentation led to a lively discussion about how a minister in a rural congregation can help people examine charcoal making and its detrimental impact on the environment. This is particularly challenging since making and selling charcoal is a major source of income in poor communities. A good example of the interface between theological education and practical preparation for ministry.

Fieldwork Coordinator

This is a new responsibility for me: finding placements for each of the students, ministerial and diaconal, and weekly social service assignments for the four student deaconesses. Ministers across Copperbelt Presbytery have been very supportive. I have been encouraging students to develop learning goals so that they are clear about what they want to accomplish in their placements. I will be visiting congregations and making telephone contact with supervisors to ensure that placements are working well.

Evangelism Campaign

After a break of four years, the Head Librarian and I were able to locate a congregation in a poorer area of Chingola, a Copperbelt Province mining town, that was interested in sponsoring the week-long evangelism campaign. On Monday, August 4, we filled a 40-passenger bus with 21 diaconal and ministerial students, two staff and equipment, supplies and gear for the week.

Members of Kabundi-Kapisha congregation greeted us with enthusiasm and turned out in numbers for the two days of training in preparation for the door-to-door ministry and the evening outdoor revival meetings. (Something that hasn't been seen in The United Church of Canada or most other Canadian denominations for some time.)

My role was to organize the program and be involved as a responsible staff member. I didn't contribute much as far as the content was concerned. In Zambia, I find myself involved in a Christian culture that is quite different from my Canadian experience. I admit to having some questions about the theology and biblical understanding behind the campaign, but I am here as a guest, to learn, support, and observe.

The door-to-door work was a very moving experience. I had tears in my eyes a number of times as we visited small cement block or clay shanties in which a single mom and four kids might live not quite sure where the next meal was coming from. We had little to give away except a word of scripture, some used clothing, and a prayer. The visiting was done in the local language, Bemba, and my role as "the Reverend" was to say a prayer in English at the end of the visit. It seems that praying in English is always acceptable.

A crowd gathered for the open air meeting each evening about 4:30—the sun goes down nightly at 6:30. The second-year students were the designated revival preachers, but before the preaching came the singing by one of the church choirs and by the crowd. It was very moving. Zambians can sing praise to God powerfully unaccompanied or with a keyboard plugged in to an occasionally malfunctioning sound system.

"Demon possession," in the traditional sense of those words, is still very much a part of the religious and theological understanding in this country. I say "in the traditional sense" because I think we in Canada are afflicted by various kinds of "demons" only we describe the maladies using more "professional" words.

Women, youth, seniors, and children made up most of our evening rallies. People came forward to respond to the preacher's call to repentance and conversion, and were supported by trained lay people. There was a laying on of hands and some people collapsed on the ground and were carried to a quiet location behind the truck that we used as a stage. They were counselled and assisted to their feet and their names were taken so the evangelism team could follow up with them. I hope the laying on of hands experience was meaningful for the "converted." I know it was powerful for the student ministers and those assisting them.



My role was to make sure that people were treated with care. Students and lay volunteers were very sensitive. Nevertheless, I don't think there was much from the revival meetings that I will be able to bring home and use in Canada.

Current Economic Climate

Zambia has been deeply affected by the economic crisis. It isn't a great time for copper mining, and about 10,000 mining and associated workers have been laid off, mainly in Copperbelt Province. Nevertheless, the streets of the cities are filled and the major grocery store seems as busy as ever. Mining, though important, provides employment for only a small portion of urban Copperbelt. Many are self-employed in very small scale businesses—selling tomatoes on the street—and many are unemployed.

Ministers tell me that they are seeing the impact of the downturn on the offering plate and in the number of those turning to the church for spiritual or material assistance.

During our stay in South Luangwa Park we were the only guests at the lodge and, according to the managers, reservations are way down. Thus two of Zambia's three major real and potential foreign exchange sources are drying up. Agriculture is the third potential source. The rains have been good this year so I expect that the maize crop will be a substantial one. That is good news for this land with so many people and such great farming potential.

Getting Ready to Say Goodbye

I have only two months left before I return to Canada. It's time to reflect on the wonderful variety of experiences I have had in my year and a half in Zambia. That will be the focus of my final newsletter due out in early May. I very much appreciate the support and encouragement I have received from the Partners in Mission office of the United Church, from church and various network friends and especially from Lynne.

Upon Return to Canada

I have accepted a call to be a minister at Westminster United Church in the old town of Weston in west Toronto. I begin there on July 1 and I am looking forward to integrating some of the experiences and reflections from my Zambian sojourn into my ministry.

I am always delighted to hear from you. Your questions and comments are very much appreciated.

Best wishes to all, Doug Varey

Doug Varey is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with the United Church of Zambia Theological College. 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.

