

Letters from Overseas

Doug Varey Writes from Zambia

May 2009

Hello, Friends,

I am leaving Zambia on Saturday, so this is my final Zambia Letter from Overseas. I want to share some thoughts, experiences, and observations from more recent days of my 15 months living and working in this democratic, developing nation.

In summary, I have been a tutor and fieldwork coordinator at the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) Theological College at the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation (MEF) near Kitwe. I have worked with wonderful students and a fine group of faculty under trying financial circumstances. The faculty has become an effective team and we have worked well together: setting priorities, managing money, dealings with issues, evaluating our curriculum, and laying plans for the future. The students have been most impressive. I hope I have challenged them as much as they have me. It has been great to build on the 60-year relationship between The United Church of Canada and our Zambian sister church.

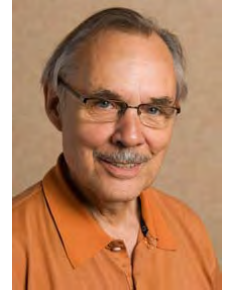


Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky

Zambia is Christian by constitution and almost everyone has a church affiliation. Sunday services run for up to three hours, and during the week there are well-attended Bible studies and group meetings. The theological atmosphere is different from mainstream Protestantism in Canada. There is a distinct note of Pentecostalism in the air and ecstatic praying is common. People, particularly the young, are looking for faith with feeling.

Most people are still very poor and vulnerable. Regular full-time salaried work is scarce and the mining industry has been hit hard by the current recession. This is impacting the college financially, and the UCZ congregations both financially and pastorally. There are relatively few job possibilities even for middle-class people with good education and experience.

Christian faith gives people a sense of hope for the future in this world and the next. God is very important as people suffer and struggle in the face of poverty and lack of opportunity. Faith shapes and strengthens people's lives in a powerful way.

My experience since January 2008 has been comprised of good people, challenging subject matter. I have attempted to make my courses as practical as possible. That has been particularly true in third-year Christian ethics. We looked at a number of ethical systems, traditional and current. In their research papers and on the examination, students were required to apply one or more of these ethical systems to a real-life issue like polygamy, HIV/AIDS, global warming, or corruption. In addition to ethics, I taught Introduction to the world of the Old Testament, Theologies of the New Testament, Early church history, and Reading the Hebrew scriptures.

Other memorable parts of my experience include beautiful African skies and a game park or two, new friends, creating a computer lab, an evangelism campaign, wonderful flowers and fascinating insects, successful hernia surgery. All in all a fine experience, but...it has been hard to be away from Lynne for so much time, the pollution from the copper smelter bothers my eyes, poverty and powerlessness are always "in your face," the copier's regularly breaking down and there is no money for paper or toner, Chisekoni outdoor market is fascinating with a myriad of items for sale, but you will

break your neck if you don't constantly watch your footing. A sense of perspective and humour and a willingness to wait have been important companions.

Africa is a fascinating continent and Zambia is a prime and positive example of emerging democracy and frustratingly slow development. I feel that my overseas personnel experience has been a gift to me. Hopefully the gifting has travelled in both directions.

Two men who visit regularly

Samuel and Friday are two men who visit my home regularly. They are respectively 21 and 28 years old.

Samuel is single. He is taking an IT course. He is an orphan and was "adopted" four years ago by a British woman then working in Zambia. She continues to send money and he receives K200,000 (\$50) per month. He also has a small shop selling food items along the roadside in a local township. Money from the shop, in a good month, pays the K130,000 monthly rent for his backyard shack.

Samuel, along with 10 other young people, is a founder of the International Youth Fellowship Organization. I admire him and the others for getting together to organize activities for themselves and others. They have a very impressive business plan that involves vehicles, office space, etc.

Samuel regularly spends time visiting several *musungus* (White people) at MEF. I'm sure the friendly, supportive relationships are important, but he also comes for things. We are his safety net when he runs out of "talk time" on his phone and needs to make a call, travel money when he must visit his grandmother in Ndola (about 100 km south). He makes me a little uncomfortable when he shows up unexpectedly to spend some time. I am always wondering what he needs today and how I should respond.

Friday is an unemployed father of a delightful three-year-old daughter. I met him originally when he was a security guard on the MEF main gate. He was also taking a course in metal working. He helped me with my Bemba, writing down the phrases like "Good morning," and "Good afternoon."

He has become my unofficial gardener, showing up regularly to transplant, weed and water. I am impressed with his determination to get back to school and employment. He is making charcoal, a poorly paid occupation, and doing gardening for several people. He has used his metal working skills to make a small-sized BBQ which he has been marketing at MEF. It is so hard to find steady paid employment.

What does the future hold for these men? Will their relationship with *musungus* continue to be important in their lives? Only time and events will tell.

A sobering ride on the 5 a.m. bus from Lake Mweru

Our bus pulled out about 5:30 a.m. We passed village after village of grass-roofed, clay brick houses. People just arising, little girls stretching and pulling their cotton *chetenge* material tightly around their shoulders in the morning chill, older girls, and the occasional boy, with a plastic container on head or in hand heading toward a sometimes distant stream for water. Some of the women were already in the small fields fronting the highway, hoe in hand. Northern Luapula province was waking up.

Why was it sobering? Well, because there were so many villages of subsistence farmers. This is not typical of Zambia. There are wide swaths with few or no villages because the soil is not good or there is no water or transport. But here we were cruising down a highway and just one or two kilometres to our right were lagoons of Lake Mweru and, further south, the Luapula River. Water and transport: powerful magnets for people. Fishing *and* farming and a means of getting your products to market all year round. Nevertheless, it was upsetting for me to realize how many subsistence, marginal, non-cash economy farmers there are in this great agricultural country.

Yes, these farm families do sell things: a couple of 50 kg bags of maize to a milling company right after harvest when the price is very low, or later, if they can afford to wait, for a better return. But they are not part of the cash economy. They cannot buy what they need to grow enough maize to feed their families for the year. So they sell and make some money and later on they run out of the staple food.

The stated goal of the government is to make Zambia a middle-class country by 2030. If the politicians are serious, they are going to have to invest more money, a lot more, on roads, schools, health centres, subsidized inputs, agricultural extension officers, and savings and loan arrangements in places like northern Luapula. But where are they to find the money? Royalties from mineral deposits exaggerate the importance of mining. Tourism is growing in importance but is still focused largely on Victoria Falls and the Luangwa Valley game parks way to the south.

As we travelled along, I was impressed with the number of new classroom blocks. The government is spending a lot on rural schools. The long-term effect will be to move people off the land. Not everyone wants to be a farmer, particularly a subsistence farmer. Remember, these clay brick and grass houses have no electricity, no television, very few furnishings, and no running water. That life is just too hard. Both boys and girls will find other options increasingly attractive. A fascinating and sobering early morning trip!

My overseas personnel experience has been very important for me at a very special time in my life. This 16-month sojourn in Zambia has enriched and given my life a new direction. Encountering African Christianity and reflecting on the needs of the church in Canada has led me to accept the call to be minister at Westminster United Church in Weston, Ontario. Time will tell whether an African interlude will enable me to bring new skills and insights to church leadership in a very different part of the world.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my wife, to the United Church of Zambia Theological College and the People in Partnership office of the United Church of Canada, to the wonderful Zambian and international friends I have met, and especially to the UCZTC students who have made all the challenges more than worthwhile.

Doug Varey is 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.

