

REPORT ON THE SOMA TEAM VISIT TO EASTERN ZAMBIA, AUGUST 2001.

Tim and I met Rev John & Jenny Simons when they visited Port Elizabeth on a SOMA trip in November 2000, and shortly thereafter phoned and asked us to join them in Zambia on this mission. Although I work for African Enterprise (an evangelical mission organisation) and have ministered in a variety of situations I had never been on a mission of such a nature, and although Tim and I have been married for 22 years, we had never been on a teaching mission *together* - so all of this was very special for us.

All the other team members were clergy couples, and while we recognise ourselves as having worth before God, we nevertheless saw ourselves as being very inadequate and unskilled for the task. At the same time we did believe that whatever we humbly offered to God (through our availability and obedience) it would somehow be a valuable contribution to the whole, (despite how insignificant we felt), and so we decided to “go for God”. We also resolved to assist the other team members in *anything* they asked us to do, even if we felt challenged or stretched by the request(s).

Tim and I left Port Elizabeth on Sunday morning, 12 August, and after a lovely day with friends in Johannesburg we overnighted at an airport hotel in order to catch the flight through to Malawi on Monday morning. We were met by Mrs Rachel Lungu, the wife of the Malawian African Enterprise Team Leader - Stephen Lungu. In Stephen’s absence, Rachel graciously hosted us and showed us around some of the areas of Lilongwe, and the following afternoon we were delivered to the offices of the Bishop of Lilongwe, + Peter Njanya, where we were to be collected. Due to some car repair hiccups, our lift was late and the decision was jointly taken to remain in Lilongwe rather than travel the roads at night. This afforded us the opportunity to have a relaxed meal together with Fr Paul Malama (a young priest, and our guide – from Chipata), and to glean insights regarding the culture, people, place and needs of the situation we would be ministering into. This was invaluable.

The following day we crossed the border into Zambia and were taken through to Chipata to meet up with Bishop John Osmer, who warmly welcomed us. As the rest of the team had been delayed by a day due to misunderstandings in bus arrangements, it meant that we had time to catch up with ourselves before rushing into ministry. (This was especially meaningful for me following an incredibly hectic schedule in leaving home and office behind in PE).

The Wednesday evening was spent in discussions with Bishop John who has served in Lesotho, Botswana, and Zambia. While working in Lesotho he received a parcel bomb from the then apartheid government, and despite the disfigurement and incapacity which has resulted, he has an amazing testimony of love, grace and mercy. We were able to engage in deep and poignant conversations related to our personal stories, and of our South African history. Moments like these were and are immeasurable, and the time was hugely significant, particularly for me personally.

The late arrival of our team leaders (as I said earlier, due to no fault of their own) meant that Tim and I had to get up on our “two pins” and ‘open the Conference’!!!!!! God must have such a sense of humour(!) [after all, we were just coming to carry suitcases, you will recall, and help with the prayer ministry!!!!]

So, after we had been collected ‘according to Fr Paul’s watch’, we arrived at the meeting and were,

in true African style, very warmly received. It was deeply moving. Tim and I both shared our testimonies, and then I followed this with reflections on the changes in South Africa. God has done it, but he has used many individuals (e.g. Nelson Mandela and [Archbishop] Desmond Tutu) to make the difference. God does use ordinary people (like you and me) and He has placed us strategically where we live (Acts 17:24-28) to effect change where we are. Esther (from the Book of Esther) is a great example. This background set the environment for John and Jenny to come in and start sharing on the Transformations theme. [Needless to say the sense of relief when our team leaders *finally* arrived later that day (also later than scheduled!) was immense!]

And so the programme unfolded. Thursday, Friday and Saturday were full days of teaching, and on the final day (Saturday) we ended with a time of ministry whereby we prayed individually for folk. Each team member partnered with a local leader, helpful both in translation as well as modelling it for them and empowering them to do it in future.

One of the most striking aspects of the teaching times was seeing the hunger of the people for the Word of God. One man went up to John and after carefully extricating some tatty papers out of a torn polythene bag, showed him notes that he had taken on a previous SOMA visit in 1991, and which he had subsequently carefully taught in the villages within his region!!! [It was so humbling!!!] This sponge-like learning attitude was evident all the time. Whenever we had a 'stretch' break rather than go outside the people would flock to the front and copy down notes which we had made on flip charts, etc. It reinforced for me that every word we spoke was hugely significant for them and therefore had to be carefully considered before it was uttered. It was an awesome responsibility.

On the Sunday morning I shared at St Paul's Church from Luke 10, along with practical ways in how one can serve one's community by reaching out to our neighbours. Rev John and Fr Paul took the service at St Barnabas, which we, along with the Bishop, joined when our service was over.

So our time with John and Jenny in Chipata was incredibly special. John has this amazing ability to convey very deep truths in ways that can be simply understood. His flip charts and story illustrations are nothing short of brilliant, and it was such a privilege to sit under their ministry. In our free time we were constantly amused by John's wit and comment (I can still see the "squadrons of mosquitoes" 'flying in formation' in their bedroom!!!!). [We must also mention that we have yet to see someone use the latest forms of technology so effectively!!!. He's an inspiration!]

Later that afternoon, along with Fr Paul, interpreters and others, we travelled through to Msoro, but along the way one of the vehicles had car trouble and was stranded at/near Petauke, (it only rejoined us two days later). At Msoro we were very warmly welcomed by the Dean, and met up with the rest of the team members, Rev Richard and Helen Salmon, and Rev Keith & Gill Powell, where we shared the experiences of the previous few days of ministry.

Short of one vehicle, we arranged with the Dean to be transported through to Mfuwe in the South Luanga Game Reserve on Monday, and then spent a wonderful two nights relaxing at the Park. This afforded us the opportunity of catching up with ourselves and of having team time together. (Although very expensive →) We were also able to go on two game drives, which were simply wonderful experiences and life-time memory making moments of enjoying God's creation.

We left on Wednesday morning and took an ‘arduous’ five hour drive through the valley (with the ever present tsetse flies accompanying us most of the way) along roads which are impassable during the rainy season (i.e. Oct – Apr), [23 Oct to 16 Apr, at noon to be precise! (quote Paul Malama!!!!)], arriving mid-afternoon at Mawanda. En route we were able to glean much from Fr Paul about the environment to which we were going, (and more of that down below). After a hasty tea, the others set off for a further three hour journey along roads “even worse” and arrived at Mzenje, a place “somewhere in the dark”.

I had never been in such a rural place before. At Mawanda, on Sundays the local church meets in a thatched, open-sided structure with most of the congregation seated under the “adjoining” tree. However a church is under construction nearby, and at the time of our visit, was built to ‘waist height’. The team, along with Fr Paul, and our interpreters, stayed in the house which has been built for the new priest who is due to come (when finances allow). We needed to take everything with us, including mattresses, linen, lanterns, etc. (which +John had supplied in Chipata). Having no modern conveniences like electricity or running water, it was like stepping back in time. We ate food which had been cooked on fires outside, we washed over a basin, and “squatted” in a little outhouse.

The people were extremely friendly, and having practised a few very simple phrases which I’d picked up, I seemed to gain very quick rapport and huge grins from all and sundry! I found it was a real privilege to interact with them and felt very comfortable sharing one-on-one and teaching in the group situation. We had a delightful time working alongside Richard and Helen, and Tim and I both learnt so much from them, especially in their deep understanding of God’s Word, their humility, and in their walk with God. Hearing of Richard and Helen’s experiences in the mission-field, their stories of parenting, and their heritage gained through generations of ancestors who have walked closely with God deeply impacted us both. We still think back to those times with very deep gratitude!

On our first evening we were welcomed by the local choirs (and there were several of them!!!), and despite our long drive we were kept entertained for about two hours until they were finally given notice to close. These choral presentations, to the shuffling of feet and winding snake-like patterns as they wended their way through each other, were made to us almost every evening in lantern light – and their beautiful lilting sounds often come back to my internal ear.

However, each morning began with the desperate bleating sounds of a goat being carried off to the slaughter (enough to seriously put me off eating anything which once had a face!), knowing that it would be brought back to us in a different form at a different time. Each meal thereafter, (aside only from breakfast which was tea/coffee and rusks made on the fire) consisted of the intestines and livers of the goat [apparently a huge delicacy], a chicken, rice and shima (sp? – a stodgy, porridge-like substance). Although unusual for each of us, and unaccustomed to it as we are!, we have nevertheless survived to tell the tale. Incidentally, Tim and I found that we were able to drink the local water, pumped up from a covered well, with no ill-effect (but the others drank their bottled water which they’d brought along).

The teaching and ministry time was geared to the needs of the local people, and it seemed to be very well received. [Subjects covered – a full teaching on the book of Revelation (!!!! – Richard most impressive!); individual testimonies, etc.; tools on how to share the Gospel message; reaching out to one’s neighbours and the local community (Luke 10); stewardship, and giving of oneself to

God; (at their special request →) organising meetings, running them, and taking of minutes; Ephesians - and how to SIT, WALK, and STAND as a Christian, etc.].

Initially we taught in the local “community hall” (although we could not all fit into this venue), but we moved across to the school on the second day when the holiday recess began. On Day 2, in the early afternoon the Chief of the region arrived to come and meet us, and having heard some stories about chiefs and the condoning of the practises of witch finders and witch-craft, we were a little uncertain as to how he would take to us. After brief discussions through the local evangelist and interpreters he seemed to give his whole-hearted support to our visit and encouraged the locals to “take close heed of what we taught”, and then he promptly left and our teaching/sharing continued “without skipping a beat”!

On our journey up to Mawanda Fr Paul had given us a detailed account of some difficulties in the area. For instance, if there is an unexplained death (HIV/Aids is also rife there) or an incident has taken place in the community the chief or headman has to come up with an answer or appeasement of some kind. So-called “witch-finders” (who apparently work as ‘professionals’) are called, and either in cohorts with the chief or headman, they accuse a suspect of a so-called “crime”. They do this by the witch-finder asking the headman who he suspects, and then the witch-finder’s “henchmen” secretly go and plant ‘evidence’ in the so-called accused’s house at exactly the same time as the whole community is summoned to collectively appear. When the accused denies the allegations, they are then challenged and the witch finder demands to go to his home and look for evidence – which he then no doubt finds in the appointed place. This is devastating for the individual, as firstly they are usually innocent, and secondly, they either have to pay a fine (chicken, goat, or more). Sometimes, they are also made to lie on the grave of the deceased person and they are physically tattooed. Being “marked”, they are then ostracised from the community. One can only begin to imagine how devastating this is for the individual and his/her family.

In recent times there had been some of these occurrences in the region, and the Bishop was called in to do some teaching on the matter. At one village the Christians decided to make a stand the next time the witch-finders were brought in, and they collectively boycotted the “kangaroo courts” which were subsequently held. This did not go down at all well as the witch-finders and their henchmen found their ongoing “pay-package” in serious jeopardy, - as you can well imagine!!! As a direct result of the Christians stand, the church of St Agnes was burnt down. On our way to Petauke we stopped and photographed the shell of this building. The walls are still standing, as are the benches made out of bricks, but all the supporting structures for the thatch roof have been burnt away. Tim queried why they did not just replace the roof, but it would appear that as fast as they collect the thatch this is “mysteriously” being arsoned.

It was very humbling to be amongst Christians who despite their persecuted lives are joyously continuing on in the faith.

Urged on by the local leaders, we felt that as a team we should write to Chief Sandwe and challenge him as to why he was turning to witch-finders when as a “devoted Catholic” he knew that the Lord God alone is the only One he/we can turn to. I was asked to write this letter (see a copy attached), and we left this with the local evangelist once we had read and discussed the contents with him, Fr Paul, and the interpreters, for them to pass on to the Chief. They were very encouraged that we had taken up the issue.

We finished our time of ministry in Mawanda with a wonderful Eucharist service. Everyone turned out in their best, and they processed into the church in grand style, Mothers Union, choirs, girls brigade, etc. with pigs and chickens wandering around beside us all. At the end of the service, regardless of how many are present, everyone shakes hands with everyone else! Quite an experience.

After we had packed up and eaten lunch we departed for Petauke where we were to meet up with the rest of the team from Mzenje, but along the way our heavily loaded 'bakkie' blew a glow plug and the engine died. We finally got it going again by pushing UP a hill for some several hundred metres (phew!) before we roll-started the vehicle in a three-point turn and got it going again, loudly rumbling into Petauke! It was with great relief that we rejoined the rest of the team. We spent the evening in a motel on the outskirts of town (bliss to catch up on personal hygiene again) and have time relaxing and hearing experiences of the others and of the goodness of God!

The following morning before 7h00, Keith and Gill left for the bus depot for Lusaka, and despite having booked seats on the bus, three of these coaches passed them by. It was therefore with great relief that they boarded around 10h00 and found themselves safely in Lusaka ready with enough time to leave for London. For the rest, we took a 'leisurely' potholed drive home to Chipata, via St Francis Mission Hospital, where we met up with a missionary couple ministering there. The tour of the hospital was a real eye-opener! We arrived back at the Bishop's house in the late afternoon and had a relaxing evening chatting and emailing!!!

The next day, along with the Bishop, the three remaining couples departed for Malawi, and aside from a little hiccup at the border where we found that the British couples had the wrong entry permits into Malawi (and had to return to Chipata to sort this out), we were otherwise on our way. After exchanging some traveller's cheques in Lilongwe and collecting a vehicle from African Enterprise we made our way down to the lake, arriving in the dark! Bishop John Osmer was only due at a provincial synod meeting in the south of Malawi the following day so he joined us for the night at the holiday resort on Lake Malawi.

Tim and I were waiting to take the next SA flight out of Lilongwe (midday on Thursday, 30th), which meant that we had two nights and a full day to rest and relax, while the other two couples lingered longer for a whole week. It was a very peaceful place where individual tent bungalows were built out on decks overlooking the lake, each having their own 'en suite' shower facilities. Simply lovely! The resort was run by a German couple, and it goes without saying that the cuisine was very different from what we had experienced in rural Zambia. (The radical change in diet resulted in my having a 24 hour tummy bug, but the others did not seem to be affected by it).

As I had awoken very early on the Wednesday morning, (around 4h00), I was raring to go and explore the place – so around 7h00 Tim and I decided to take a walk. Just as we were leaving the dining area, about ten metres from the building, with Tim walking just ahead of me, I happened to look down at my feet and to my alarm saw a snake all arched and ready to strike! My foot was launched in mid-air and dangling "toe to fang" in front of its face (it happened so quickly I did not even have time to think about what I should do!!!), and in an unlady-like fashion I hopped sideways around it while it continued to sway its arched neck from side to side! We both sidled our way backwards and then watched mesmerized as it kept its eye on us, and then just slunk silently down and slipped away. Although somewhat shaken, we nevertheless went for a lovely

long walk and only later checked the books and charts – clearly it was a black mamba (although nothing black about it!!!), but decided not to make too much of it, (and possibly spoil the rest of the team’s visit there). Yes, despite us both being Africans we were very much sobered by the experience! (When one reads verses like Luke 10:19, and Mark 16:18 one does not exactly want to put God’s Word directly to the test!!! But God is faithful (Ps 91: 11-15)! And we have found Him to be gracious in protecting both Tim and I in every way, right throughout the trip.

One last thing I must mention (in case others are following these tips and decide to take a rest respite after a ministry trip in a strange land) is that one needs to check out how payment of holiday stays are made. Our accommodation quotes, etc., were given in US \$ amounts, and we happily assumed that we could pay with any combination of travellers cheques and/or credit cards. This was not so!!!! and Tim found himself driving 25 kms to the nearest town (Salima) and then spending four hours standing in a queue to get a wad of local currency (that banking trip in itself turned out to be a memorable experience!). Needless to say, between my frequent feverish trips to and fro from the bathroom I was starting to think that as a foreigner he had been stripped of the money and the vehicle hijacked, and consequently was understandably more than relieved to see him again!!!!

And so our time quickly slipped by, and we were headed back to Lilongwe, to the airport, and home to South Africa again.

Great to be back home with everything understandable and familiar, but we will be ever grateful to God for the incredible experience we had of learning to trust Him ‘out on the edge’ of our faith, and finding Him faithful in everything! It was an amazing time. I had never before seen in people such a hunger to be taught God’s Word and His principles, and it was indeed a privilege to be part of a team where we were doing just that! May the seeds that were sown be rooted, grounded and established, and in due time bring forth an abundant harvest – to His glory!

SHAN FOX
27.11.01

ZAMBIAN / MALAWIAN PHRASES

Good Morning, how are you?

Mawli bwanji

I am fine

Ndili bwino

PLEASE

Chonde

THANK YOU VERY MUCH

Dzikomo kwambili

YES

INDE

NO

AI

Water

Manzi

Goodbye
Stay well

Pitani Bwino
Tsalini Bwino

My name is

Tsinalanga ndini
Ndichedwa

I come from

Ndichoka ...

I like this place

Kwondisungalatsa

Love, Joy, Peace

Chikondi, Chiwemwe, ndi Mtendere

(A greeting/blessing they give you in response to something you have either done or said!).