

Africa Mission Trip June 2010 - Report Highlights

RWANDA

The Unexpected Experience in Nyanza - The evening we arrived in Rwanda, Bp. Denis told us we were going to take a taxi van the next day to Nyanza. Although we didn't get all the information before hand, it turned out that the purpose of the trip was, besides seeing some interesting sights, to meet with several men from a contracting company that was recommended to Bp. Denis for the building of the new school and church facility. "Meeting" was a serious understatement. We were wined and dined by the contractors and entertained by a really good authentic African dance team, then the key men from the contracting company addressed us. At this point we were wondering why these men were throwing such a big party for us. They must really want our business! But soon we discovered as these men began to talk that they wanted to join the EOC and begin a new church there! They lavished words of great love and gratitude upon us, asked me to suggest a name for the new mission parish, and then told us they had decided together to give us a cow!



Contractor team: Adelite, Delphin, Hudal, & John



African Dance Team

Being completely dumbfounded and not knowing what to say or how to respond, I stumbled through a little speech that I guess went ok, except that I found out later I committed a cultural blunder. Knowing that we couldn't take the cow with us, I suggested it might be sold and the money used to help with the costs of developing a new church there. That was received about as well as Jesus received the disciples' reaction to the woman pouring expensive perfume on Him. I thought I was being practical and generous, but they were disappointed. I didn't know that in their culture giving a cow is a very seriously significant symbol. It is an expensive gift and shows great sacrificial love on their part. And a cow is tied to family history. Cows are given names and the story of where a cow came from is passed on from generation to generation. So when someone gives a cow, whether it's as a dowry for marriage or as a gift for some other occasion, it means the person is making you a part of their family in a gesture of great love.

As Bp. Denis explained to me later, in a situation like ours the person giving the cow keeps it and cares for it and assumes all expenses for doing so, but it is still considered our cow. So the next day, in an almost ceremonial procession, we were taken out to the pasture to visit the cow we had been given. It was the best of the herd, a spotted cow - and she was pregnant. I was encouraged to get into the pen with her and talk to her and pet her, which she didn't warm up to very quickly. Eventually, however, she got used to me, and Celestine, who had gotten into the pen with me, told me I was expected to give her a name. How do you name a cow, especially one that you just met? I thought for a moment and announced that the cow's name would be Agnes. I considered that a variation of agios (purity/holiness) and agape (sacrificial love) - representing the pure and sacrificial love they had shown us. This was met with much applause and shouts of approval.



Bonding with the cow

After that a cowhand got in the pen and, while petting the cow, sang a song to her - a song that, deducing from their laughs was apparently something about now being owned by us Americans. I was then given the opportunity to speak. After I apologized for my cultural blunder, I related the Gospel story of the woman and her perfume, and reassured them I had no desire for the cow to be sold. Then I expressed my sincere gratitude for their lavish display of love - and my words were again received by much applause and expressions of approval. To wrap things up, the cow was milked and the milk presented to me, and I was told to give it to one of the poor village children to drink, which I did. After the boy drank it and displayed his white milk moustache, applause again broke out.

One last note - The name I suggested for the new mission parish was Holy Transfiguration, because as they entertained and welcomed us their faces shone with the love and joy of God, and certainly their love was transforming to us. They quickly had me write down the name and sign the paper. I remember thinking, "What the heck did I just do?" but what else could I do? Bp. Denis will begin going there soon to begin catechizing them. What an incredible experience!

The First Sunday - We worshipped in the morning at St. John's in Kigali and in the afternoon at St. Joseph mission parish in Burema - a long but blessed



Liturgy at St. John's EOC

day. At St. John's I gave the homily and concelebrated together with Bp. Denis and Fr. John. It was a joy and an honor to serve together with them. Worship was good and it was such a blessing to see familiar faces again and worship together with our brothers and sisters there. When the service was over, we took a taxi van to Burema. The ride on the dirt roads there would have been a challenge for the most heavy-duty ATV, so it was just plain brutal on the old beat up 15 passenger Toyota van that 26 of us were packed into. Four times we all had to get out to take weight off of it so it could get over the hole or bump it was stuck on, but eventually we arrived safe and sound to the meeting place of the St. Joseph EOC mission parish in Burema. The renovated building there houses the sewing school, a chapel complete with icons painted on the wall behind the altar, an office, and sleeping quarters for Deacon James, the director of the sewing school and the pastoral head of the mission parish.



Liturgy at St. Joseph EOC Mission

Since the packed chapel felt like it was 200 degrees, we decided to set up an altar and have the Liturgy outside. At the beginning of the service I did about 25 baptisms - one adult and 24 children. That was such a blessing to me. Of course, Bp. Denis or Fr. John could have done the baptisms at another time, but the people like having us foreigners do such things when we are there. The Liturgy was also good, and at the last minute I had been asked to give the message again, which I stumbled through (at least that's how I felt) and by God's grace hopefully gave them something they could feed on. I was so tired by that point I barely knew what I was doing, but I knew God would still accomplish His purposes.

I was very proud of the three young people (and, of course, as always my wife) for the way they handled themselves when asked to get up in front of gathered people and say some words of greeting, and also just in how they showed the love of God and cared for everyone they met, especially the children. All of them blossomed in this experience.

Deacon James proudly displayed for us his certificate for completing the micro-economics course we sponsored him to take. He already has a lot of agriculture growing on the land there, but this course has now prepared him to get into many other things as well, such as raising rabbits and chickens, and to teach the same to people in the other churches. This is a very good thing in that it will both provide food for them and provide a source of income from the sale of the food. I continue to be impressed with Deacon James' diligence, leadership skills, compassion, and energy. He is a hard-working, faithful man.



At St. Augustine Mission Parish in Nyagasambu - We climbed the steep mountain up to the small plot of land purchased for the mission parish, gaining altitude and losing breath as we ascended. And these people do this all the time?! We were very warmly received by about 50 adults and children, and especially by the lay elder of the community. There is a simple canopy set up right now and that is where the mission parish meets on Sundays. Preparations are being made to erect a small adobe building there in place of the canopy. It was the hope that this project would be far enough along that we could begin

laying adobe bricks, but that wasn't the case. Because their rainy season had been harder and longer than usual, they couldn't dig to level the ground and make bricks as often as they wanted to. Only 1/5 of the bricks had been made (about 1,400) because they were being made from the dirt removed in the digging and leveling of the site, which was only about 1/3 of the way finished due to the rain. So, rather than assist with building the structure, we helped prepare the land, which meant digging out the hard mountain earth with a pick then hoeing and shoveling it out of the way in order to level the ground.



Jennifer and Nathanael help with the digging.



Anastacia helping clear the loose dirt.

It was in the middle of the day and very hot, and together with the altitude's thin air it was necessary to take short breaks frequently. It was unspoken but understood that you would work for a while, then someone would come and tap you on the shoulder and take your place, then you would do the same after a little rest. We got quite a bit accomplished, but there is still much to do. They are hoping the building will be done before the next rainy season.

Light of the World African Seminary - This is a small venture led by Bp. Denis and Fr. John in Kigali to train future leaders for the church. It is really more of a university in its course content and heavier in anthropology and sociology than theology. They have it set up that way on purpose in order to attract students from outside the EOC, since the small tuition each student pays helps fund the classes and other projects as well. There is consistently about 10-12 students right now and they are a mix of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-Day Adventists, and EOC people. I was asked to teach there one night on any topic I chose. I had prepared a couple possibilities, but then I decided I would ask when I got there what the students would like to hear from me. It certainly wouldn't have been my pick of a topic, but they wanted me to address the origins of the Orthodox Church. So, I did a recap of Church History, the development of the eastern and western centers of Christianity, their estrangement and separation, and the predominant differences between them today. Then I opened it up for questions. In hind sight, I wish I would have allowed a lot more time for questions. We ended up going almost an hour past time because they had questions about many things. I hope it was helpful!

Peace International School - The school continues to operate out of the Mugabo's home. There are around 100 students. One morning we were basically given the freedom to do whatever we wanted to with them. They are so precious - and so thrilled to have us there. We started outside, then went into their classrooms. Outside, I taught them how to hit a ball with a bat while Kathy and the others blew up



balloons for them. They loved it all. Then, in the classrooms, Jennifer took a class, Anastacia and Nathanael took a class together, I took a class, and Kathy went back and forth coordinating things. We did various crafts with them, sang "Sunday School" type songs, and then passed out candy - which, of course, they loved. Kathy did a great job coordinating the activities with the children,



and I was really blessed by how the three young people entered into the time with the children, especially the classroom time. I could hear Jennifer the best, since she was right next door, and she did an amazing job.

The Mugabo's home, and therefore the school, continue to be on the list for demolition as part of the governments city development plans. However, nothing will likely happen until after the elections in August, and hopefully not until the end of the year.

St. Michael's EOC in Gitarama - Unfortunately, we didn't get to go there on this trip, but I did get to spend a little time with Fr. Gratien, the parish priest, who went with us on the bus to Nyagasambu. He is such a gentle, godly man, and everything I hear about him is good. The church there is growing, and they have a small plot of land and hope to build on it sometime soon.

The New Building Project in Kigali - Because the land that was purchased a year ago has sat idle with no building activity on it, it runs the risk of being taken over by the government. So it was imperative that good progress be made on this while we were there. After the initial meeting with the contractors in Nyanza, which was overshadowed by the appeal to be EOC and the whole cow experience, we met with them two more times. Mother Pilar had e-mailed the proposed layout of the buildings and a detailed plan of the 1st building that would house the school and the seminary, and in which the church could meet for a period of time. From that the contractors drew up plans and pictures for the first building. The thought is that we would start with that building only, then we would add the others later. However, the contractors will draw up plans for the whole complex and give us a bid on both it and on just the one building. We will also get a bid from two other contractors, but the hope is that the company in Nyanza will be competitive, since our preference is to go with them - especially after they gave us a cow!

Sketch of building one - the primary school and seminary

