



# Under the Southern Cross

July 2009

It's a sunny winter day here in Benoni. The sky is bright blue and there is a slight breeze, idyllic if it weren't so cold... for us anyway. Last night it was below freezing and for all the beautiful sunshine, I am most grateful for the space heater here in my office.

This is the third shot at a newsletter and I apologize that none of the earlier ones were completed. These past few months have been quite full, especially with doing a great deal of travelling. It is good to be home now for a couple of weeks to get a bit caught up. As I write, Christopher Robin, my 12 year old yellow lab, is sleeping next to my desk. He continues to be well for his age but is now battling with lick granuloma – compulsive paw licking that started when he was in the quarantine 7 years ago which seems to come and go – and leaves his paws raw. At the moment it looks as if we might be winning this round.

So where to start? Since I last wrote, I have visited all the countries that are in my region so let me bring you up to date on that.

## Zimbabwe

At the end of February and the beginning of March I visited Zimbabwe for the first time in my present capacity. This was a learning trip, with a visit to the Murray Theological College, a Reformed Church of Zimbabwe seminary that is not a partner for the Presbyterian Church (USA) but is a part of NetACT, the Network for African Congregational Theology, which I have been working with on developing an HIV and AIDS training curriculum. It is small but impressive in what they are doing to train pastors for their denomination.

Most of my time in Zimbabwe, though, was spent with our Presbyterian partners, a Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) and a presbytery of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA). Both of these may sound familiar to you as the first is based in Malawi with Synods in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The second is based here in South Africa with a Synod in Zambia and a Presbtery in Zimbabwe. I must say that my overall reaction

was awe at the resilience of the people in Zimbabwe in the face of the adversity that they have been facing for years and years and the deep faith that has gotten them through it.

On a first visit to a country I like to just listen to what people have to say about what life is like and how HIV and AIDS are affecting their lives and the lives of their congregations. I also like to see what they are currently doing to address this issue. In Harare I visited the Women's Guild of one congregation thinking that we would discuss the various ways they have been affected by HIV and AIDS. We did do that. One woman's daughter died a year ago. They continue to be grieved and frustrated that when they learned of her diagnosis they had to scramble to find funds to buy antiretroviral drugs (ARV) but by the time they could come up with the funds it was too late. Although the women were open to my agenda they also had one of their own. How could they start an AIDS project in their congregation? What most impressed me was that they had already started to save money to start this project. After a long talk about what could be done, they decided to identify their gifts, continue to grow the money and most importantly to pray for 6 months to see where God would lead in this matter. I promised to come back in August and we would look at next steps then. So I invite you to pray with the women as they try to discern what the next step they should take is.

The stories could go on and on... a program for orphaned children, a feeding project for street people and meeting with men, women and youth to listen to their stories and answer their questions about HIV and AIDS. Along the way I had a joyful reunion with a woman who had taken part in the Malawi Workshop, a workshop that we ran in 2003 for AIDS coordinators and women leaders of our partner churches. She is a district nurse in an area just north of Bulawayo. She continues to use the information she learned at that time.

## Lesotho

The middle of March found me in Lesotho meeting Rev. Mothumi who had just been appointed as the HIV and AIDS Coordinator for

the Lesotho Evangelical Church (LEC), another of our partner churches. Lesotho is a beautiful 'mountain kingdom', as they style themselves, but has the third highest HIV infection rate in the world. Rev. Mothumi has a real challenge ahead of him, creating this position in a situation where the need can be overwhelming but I think that he will do just fine. There is a group of very knowledgeable folks in the LEC who are more than happy to help him and yes, I will be going back several times this year to see what I can do.

My second visit to Lesotho was a week in May. Again to spend time with Rev. Mothumi and brainstorm with him about what the LEC program will look like and where to start. At this time – July – I understand he still does not have a functioning office i.e. no lights, no phone, no running water, no equipment so I have to give him high marks for carrying on under such trying circumstances.

While in Lesotho, Rev. Mothumi and I spent a day with a project called Send a Cow which operates very much like the Heifer Project. We were interested to see their gardening programs, one aspect of which is key-hole gardens. These are basically stone cylinders with a radius of the gardener's arm span and the height of their waist. Once built, they are very helpful for people with low energy and for whom bending over to work the ground is difficult. The gardens were absolutely stunning and we were told that they grew enough not only for their family needs but they also had some to sell. The participants' generosity not only in sharing what they had learned but also in sharing their produce was overwhelming. I came away with a gourd, 3 pumpkins and many bottles of preserves. Needless to say, I shared much of this, gladly, with friends in Lesotho as South African Airlines would not have been thrilled if I had tried to take it all back with me. I will try to get back to see Rev. Mothumi and our friends in Lesotho in September.

### **Democratic Republic of Congo**

Before you start pulling out your maps and wondering when the Congo got moved to Southern Africa let me say that it hasn't and no, it is not in my 'region'. However, International Health Ministries decided to develop a new wrap to launch at the PW Gathering in July. You may remember the one that we did three years ago in Malawi on home-based care. This one will be on the needs of children, focusing on what makes up a healthy community for children. Together with a group of women who work with vulnerable children, we came up with a list of what children

need to have a healthy community. It is now available as a gift for those who make a donation of \$50 or more to the AIDS Orphans and Vulnerable Children's ECO (Extra Commitment Opportunity account) #051674. If you are interested to know more about this please check the PC(USA) web site at <http://www.pcusa.org/aids-international/get-wrapped.htm> (Information from this site on how to make a gift to the Orphans and Vulnerable Children ECO can also be found in the box at the end of this letter.)

### **South Africa**

In June the second round of Footprints HIV and AIDS Training workshops was completed. The participants attended 6 weekends over a three month period looking at various aspects of HIV and AIDS. The first round was with the Lowveld Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and finished a year ago. The second round was with the Tshwane Presbytery (formerly Pretoria) and finished in April. The idea of the workshops is that the participants from various congregations are brought up to date on basic AIDS knowledge as well as looking at factors such as AIDS and theology and how culture and HIV infection are interrelated. They will then return to their home congregations to share what they have learned. Part of this process is also to look into how their congregations can respond to the AIDS crisis in their communities. In both presbyteries, it was quite moving to see the passion and compassion, grounded in faith, which many of the participants brought to the workshop. For some it came from first-hand experience of caring for a loved one with AIDS. For others from watching how AIDS is impacting their communities and wanting to make a difference.

In June, the Rev. Esther Buyelwa Maringa, AIDS Coordinator for the EPC and I went back to the Lowveld Presbytery for a follow-up visit with the first group. The participants from one congregation had started a project for the elderly in their community. Another participant worked with her congregation to identify orphans and see what they needed and how the congregation could help. Two or three others talked about how they have now become the 'ones to talk to' in their congregations if someone has a concern regarding HIV and AIDS and most have been working on sharing what they have learned with their congregations. They were thrilled because of how well they were received when sharing this information. Needless to say, we were also thrilled at these successful outcomes that are continuing to expand. I want to thank the Medical

Benevolence Foundation (MBF) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) for funding these first two workshops.

Looking ahead, there are about 6 more presbyteries that need the training. We are also working on a manual so that the participants can have something other than handouts to take back with them and so that the program will be able to be replicated elsewhere without having to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

### **Zambia**

The community school in Chawama, a part of Lusaka, finished the building of its 4 classroom building and held the formal opening service in May. It was exciting to see a dream become a reality. The people who were most excited, though, were the children who would now have a beautiful school building rather than all being together in the sanctuary of the church. They are still looking for funds for furnishing the building so that, although the children have their own classrooms, they carry pews from the church next door to the school to sit on; but it is a great start.

While in Zambia I also met with several other key players including the General Secretary of the CCAP and the committee that has oversight of one of the other community schools. The community schools are a way that the CCAP Synod of Zambia had decided to reach out to orphans and vulnerable children in their communities.

Perhaps one of the most fun events was working with a group of women, mostly widows, who have come together to learn to sew. We did a lesson on 'Piecing for a Quilt 101'. They had seen an apron in an up-market store made out of pieced 2" squares of the African fabric that they use for their clothes and wanted to know how they could do that as well. Unfortunately the apron that we picked up was not a good pattern as it was lopsided!

Speaking of patterns, for a moment the women had me quite confused when they asked if they could borrow my patterns. It turns out that they, bless them, thought that I made my own clothes (how else would I have different clothes to wear every day for a week?). Sorry to say, I don't have patterns but if anyone does have some that you would be willing to pass on, please let me know and we can talk about how best to get them here. They are interested in both patterns for children's clothes and for adults.

### **Malawi**

The last of 'my' countries to be visited was Malawi, from which I returned just over a week ago. This time I visited the Embangweni Hospital in northern Malawi again where a program is about to develop between the hospital and congregations in Loudon Presbytery to support each other in reaching out to people in the community who are living with HIV.

In Ekwendeni, also northern Malawi, I had a delightful visit with the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities project of the Ekwendeni Hospital. It is working with people in the community on alternative forms of gardening. This project started in response to so many children having to be treated in the Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit. There is a short, very complimentary section about this project in the June 2009 edition of the National Geographic (page 57) as part of a special report on 'Feeding the World'.

From the hospital, I went over to the Livingstonia Synod AIDS Programme. This is a program that I have been visiting for 7 years, since I began working in Africa, so it is always like going back home to see old friends and to learn what new and exciting things they are currently up to. The director had been away for a couple weeks so I was going to talk with her the following day and was just hoping to get a ride back to a friends' home in Mzuzu with her. To make a long story short, we had to meet that day as she was going to be going away again that afternoon, did I want to come along? Absolutely! So after quickly packing a bag for overnight I joined them on a visit to a new project they started in March for empowering young women. It is based in an area that feels like time forgot it, up on the Tanzanian border. Here girls are still forced into marriage at very young ages primarily to pay off a family debt, but sometimes for other reasons. I met a young girl 11 years old, who had been married for four years. The good news is that the project is very well thought out and well received by the community. While in the village, we met about a dozen young women/girls who are now back from marriage (what a concept!) living with their families and back in school.

### **Nutrition and Gardening**

As you may have noticed, one of the things I am have a growing interest in is nutrition and gardening. Just this morning the radio mentioned that here in South Africa the cost of an average food basket is up 20% from last year. It is imperative for people who are HIV infected, including and especially those who are taking anti-retroviral drugs, to have a good diet. When

there are hungry times, the people living with HIV – and the children – are the first to die. Everywhere I go these days I ask what people are doing about gardening and what they are eating. It seems that God's bounty is generous but we need to learn – or relearn – how best to use it. If I can share a little bit with folks from one place with people in another perhaps that will help. For instance, I am always talking about the maringa tree. Among other things, its leaves have about a 90% protein content and can be very instrumental in increasing one's nutrition. In Congo I met a woman who was HIV infected and claimed that the maringa leaves, as recommended by people in the Women's Centre of the Presbyterian Church, were what helped her to start gaining weight again when she was having trouble eating. It is also used, successfully, as a food supplement for underweight children.

### Looking Ahead

The coming months will be full... jam-packed to be more accurate. **Next week** the second HIV and AIDS Curriculum Workshop training for NetACT will be beginning. That is going to be a bit of a struggle as our allotment of days has been shaved from a 5 to 3, due to other meetings taking place at the same time, but the amount of work needing to be accomplished has not changed.

**August** I am committed (and looking forward) to returning to Zimbabwe. **September** I hope to get back to Lesotho for a couple of days and have also been invited to give a presentation for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Association of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). In **October** my father will be coming out for a visit again. This time I will take him for a visit to Zambia. The last time he came we went to Malawi. At the end of October I will be back in Zambia for workshops and evaluations and I promised the people in Malawi that I would come back in **November** to see them again.

### Closing Thoughts

On Easter the pastor challenged us to think about what it means to be 'Easter People in a Good Friday world'. How can we be God's bearers of hope, justice, compassion, peace and yes, new life to our world? I have no profound replies to this so give it to you as a question to which we must each search for an answer.

Blessings to each of you....

*Janet*

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### How to receive a wrap as a thank you gift

To support orphans and vulnerable children, make a gift to the orphan and vulnerable children [Extra Commitment Opportunity \(ECO\) account #051674](#). These gifts can either be given online or sent to:

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Individual Remittance Processing  
P.O. Box 643700  
Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700

**Please put ECO number #051674 on the memo line of your check.**

In appreciation for contributions of \$50 or more, you will receive a wrap. Your generous gift will ensure the continued support of our African partner churches' projects that nurture orphan and vulnerable children.

#### For more information

For more information about the wrap project call (502) 569-5415 or (888) 728-7228 x5415.

**Thank you for your support! Thank you for your caring!**