

22 April 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters

Tanzania in March

Alleluia! Christ is risen! I greet you all in the joy of the Risen Lord and pray that you are having a happy Easter. I hear very encouraging reports of *Experience Easter* activities and increases in Easter congregations and I hope that has been your own experience too.

It is three weeks since I returned from Tanzania. Passiontide and the early days of Easter have prevented me finding the space to write reflectively about my visit, but I want to do so now. In the same way as I did with my report on the Lambeth Conference.

Who?

The party that set out from Gloucester was four in number - Debbie Forman, curate of Churchdown, who is acting as Link Officer between us and the Diocese of Western Tanganyika, Lucy Taylor, our Communications Officer, Archdeacon Hedley and myself. When we arrived in Dar es Salaam, we were joined by the three person delegation from California - Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves, Canon Brian Nordwick, one of her canons and a permanent deacon, and Robin Denney, who, though the Diocese of El Camino Real, is working at present as an agricultural mission partner in the Sudan, but who came to join us for the week.



American party



Gloucester Party

Where?

The seven of us flew on the once-a-day flight from the capital, Dar es Salaam, on the east coast of Africa, across Tanzania to Kigoma, on the very west side on the shore of the beautiful Lake Tanganyika. Here we were greeted at the airport by Bishop Gerard, with his three suffragans, Mark, Naftali and Sospeter, and by about two hundred singing, chanting, cheering and dancing Christians. An overwhelming start! There was an amazing motorcade into the town, singing youngsters packed on to open trucks as they escorted us to St Michael's Kigoma for a welcoming service and the first of many feasts. Later in the day we were driven (dirt track road, many potholes, but we had turned down a chartered aircraft as we didn't want to live differently from our hosts) the two and a half hour journey to Kasulu, where the cathedral and diocesan headquarters are and where we were to stay from Saturday to Wednesday. Our final two days were back in Kigoma. But we were, of course, out and about every day. There were few gaps in the programme. The seven of us stayed within the compound, where Bishop Gerard's house is, as well as the diocesan offices. We share the simplicity of life there - the electricity was spasmodic, the water more so and usually brown when it came. Within the camaraderie of the group the minor deprivations became a source of pride and even joy!



Airport Welcome



Road in kasulu

Some highlights for me

- The Eucharist in St Andrew’s Cathedral on the Sunday morning, lasting more than three and a half hours, with a congregation of about two thousand, and including the signing of the partnership agreement by the three bishops with much African ceremony - three copies of the agreement danced in baskets on the heads of three women! My sermon, even with translation into Swahili, only took 25 minutes of the three and a half hours!
- Visits to I don’t know how many different churches and in every one of them a warm welcome, huge enthusiasm, many hands stretched out in friendship, wonderful singing and dancing (yes, we did join in and there are pictures to prove it!), much praising the Lord and always generous hospitality from people who could ill-afford to give it.
- A remarkable meeting, discussing the issues that divide the Communion (see below).
- Visits to several schools, primary and secondary, with students desperate to learn, but facilities very primitive.
- Standing on the site under the mango tree at Ujiji where Stanley met up with Livingstone and uttered the immortal line, “Dr Livingstone, I presume.” Part of the story of the coming of the Christian faith to Tanzania.
- The Bible College at Kasulu, where students (training to be priests or evangelists) study, mainly through the internet and with a paucity of books.
- A wonderful “drama”, more like a dance, at the secondary school in Kigoma, with three girls dancing with cauldrons of fire on their heads, representing the Holy Spirit, in honour of three bishops.
- A visit to an orphanage, run by German mission partners, mainly for babies whose mothers’ had died of malaria (rather than AIDS), but with four lovely little boys, who wanted to be carried till our arms ached.
- The gracious, and in fact enthusiastic, reception given in a diocese that has no female deacons or priests to Bishop Mary, soon dubbed the “special bishop”!
- A visit to a refugee camp, with several thousand refugees from Burundi, who showered our vehicles with yellow flowers, gave us the warmest welcome, I think, of the whole week, told us that we brought encouragement to them in their sadness, but to us displayed simply faith and joy.

And much more!



Signing of Partnership Agreement



Welcome at refugee camp



Secondary School in Kigoma



Visit to orphanage

Some overall impressions

I was moved to tears several times. First, by the welcome, the hospitality and the gratitude to us for coming. You cannot imagine, I could hardly imagine, how much this visit meant to the people we met and the huge trouble to which they had gone to prepare for our coming. Second, by the singing, the dancing, the praising and the exuberance. I knew Gloucester would feel a bit tame this Easter! Third, by the faith and the joy and the church growth that went with it.

We rather lost the rhythm of Lent - many alleluias irrespective of the season! But we did have a strong sense of being prepared for Passiontide, at least for Passiontide preaching, and I found myself speaking back in the diocese in Holy Week about palm waving welcomes, about a sense of the hospitality of God in the way women knelt with bowl and water to allow us to wash before every meal, about seeing the figure of Christ crucified in some of those whose suffering we met. Not surprising Bishop Mary's Holy Week homilies on the El Camino Real website make the same connections (www.edecr.org).

Obviously we met a lot of need and were always holding back from offering to help simply because that was outside our brief. But it was hard to do so, for the need was so great, whether to roof churches, or help with education on birth control, or to provide books for the Bible College, solar cooking pots for the women who spend hours each day collecting wood for fires (and doing no good to the environment) or bicycles for clergy. I do believe we need to come back to how we might encourage individuals and parishes to help, but I know it ought to be part of a wider review of how we make all our overseas partnerships effective. I did make one commitment, the one I could make myself, namely to put money from this year's episcopal collections towards the building of a Boys' Hostel at Bishop Mpango Secondary School in Kibondo. It will cost £15,000 and will allow boys who live too far away and are therefore deprived of secondary education to be boarders at the school and thus to receive the education they need.



One of many welcomes



Bishop Mpango Secondary School Hall

Are we fulfilling our aims?

In asking the diocese to support this triangular partnership, I set out three reasons for creating these companion relationships. The first was simply to help create for all of us a greater sense of the

universality of the Church of Jesus Christ and both to encourage and be encouraged by that sense of belonging. I believe we began to see that being fulfilled. Our visit very clearly was a major affirmation for the people of the Diocese of Western Tanganyika. It was also a wonderful experience of Christian fellowship for those of us who went. It needs, of course, to spread further. The second aim was to earth our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals in knowledge of and concern for particular places and people. We could see the potential for that, especially in relation to education, health issues and the empowerment of women. Something as simple as the Boys' Hostel is a practical outcome that furthers the goals. The third aim was to create the relationships that would enable people to listen graciously to one another as we explore the deeply divisive issues in the Anglican Communion. We spent a remarkable day, some dozen or so of us, Tanzanians, Americans and English, talking about church policy and ecclesiology, about our differing cultures and, yes, we talked about homosexuality, gay blessings, etc. We did not all agree, but I did sense that we were learning to speak the truth, as we each saw it, in love and with respect for one another. And I think what we have in terms of relationships now, is something very precious on which we can build.



Group discussions



Local Hospital

So is this the work of the Holy Spirit?

Bishop Mary and Bishop Gerard both went to Lambeth looking for a diocesan partnership. I did not. It wasn't in my mind at all. But, as I wrote to you in August, I soon had a strong conviction that, notwithstanding our other partnerships in India and Sweden, to which I am entirely committed, that God was calling me to initiate a three-way partnership. I also felt very clearly led to the two bishops and the two dioceses with whom this partnership now exists. I am usually a little reluctant to claim the directing of the Holy Spirit for every idea that comes into my head, but I have to say that I do think that it was the Holy Spirit who led me to initiate this partnership and who led Bishop Mary and Bishop Gerard to say yes on the basis of a very short acquaintance, and, after the visit to Tanzania, I am all the more convinced. We all sensed the Holy Spirit at work in this partnership and began to see the first-fruits of it. For myself I have found myself profoundly grateful to God for leading the diocese into a partnership with two very different dioceses and two very different bishops, for both of whom I have enormous respect and affection. I am glad many of you will have the opportunity to meet them soon.

What happens now?

Unfortunately we could not find dates when both Bishop Mary and Bishop Gerard could be in the Diocese of Gloucester together. But Bishop Mary will be here from 1 to 7 May, together with David Bird, the Dean of her cathedral, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in San José, and Michael Reid, one of her deacons, who is the Link Officer for the partnership with us. Clergy and layworkers will meet them at the Training Day at the Racecourse on 5 May. Bishop Gerard, with three others, will be visiting us from 2-8 July. In September the three bishops will be together in California. That is a fairly intensive series of gatherings to create firm foundations. Next year there will, of course, be less episcopal globe-trotting and more emphasis on drawing others in and finding realistic, sustainable and enriching ways of being companion dioceses. My postponed visit to Bangalore and Dornakal will happen in August and, after that, I hope I can help the diocese think through an integrated approach to our partnerships that recognises limitations - distance, carbon footprint, financial pressures, etc - but

helps us nevertheless to think globally in relation to our world and universally in relation to Christ's Church.

A Partnership of Prayer

I was given a beautiful gift, a Tanzanian carved nativity. I have identified the right place for it in my chapel at Bishopscourt and there it will be, with a light burning in front it. As I kindle that light each morning, it will bring into my mind these brothers and sisters in faith and stimulate my prayers for them. I ask of you that you also pray for them, as the cycle of the Diocesan Intercessions invites you to do, and to ask the Lord to make our world-wide partnerships fruitful.

I thank you if you have persevered with a long text! I hope it conveys what a blessing this visit was for Hedley, Lucy, Debbie and me. We need to share the experience with you.

+Michael

To view all the photographs taken during the visit to Tanzania visit
www.flickr.com/photos/36996861@N07/