

Zimbabwe – June 2016

After a look around the airport during the Sunday we boarded for Johannesburg with our five cases weighing around 22.7-22.9Kg each! If we had taken another bible or a few more song books we would have been over the limit. After good flight, we celebrated a rather unexpected communion in a restaurant, a sacrament we were to share every day, before a bit of a bumpy ride to Harare where, after getting our visas, we were met by Ketani, John and their driver in the truck to which we would become so accustomed over the next two weeks.



We were driven to the family home, past Mugabe's house, where the wall must be over ¼ mile long, guarded night and day. The contrast was absolute. At the home we met the rest of the family and friends who would look after us so well during our stay. After a prayer and a coffee, we toured the estate, meeting the dogs and the chickens.

On unpacking, we gave Ketani and John bibles, chorus books and paracetamols/ibuprofen. They were over the moon about them as these would be real life savers to the people in their care. These gifts would make a real difference to people both spiritually and physically.

After supper, we hit the sack, not 100% sure what the next day would hold!

The world woke up in earnest on the Tuesday, when we had been told we would be working with 30-40 children in a classroom, so Millie and Gwen prepared craft activities for the children. We were subsequently presented with around 100 children outdoors! Craft was obviously a non-starter, so we shared the story of Noah instead before playing with them for a while, sharing such cultural gems as the 'Hokey Cokey'! I took some of the lads to run around with a rugby ball whilst Mille and Gwen did some skipping.

It was on this first day that we realised that things may not be going exactly as planned. The part of our briefing about 'being flexible' became reality rather than theory! However, we were able to share the story of Noah and play our games with children from various schools, although one particular song did get on our nerves after a while!

It was very strange being the centre of attention, especially when some of the children may never have seen a white person before.

On the way to one school we had been told we would also spend some time with an older class. We had no time to prepare, so we let them ask questions about England before visiting the the feeding programme where we learned that some of the children have to walk over five miles to school along dirt tracks, without their mums holding their hands, and, obviously, five miles home again afterwards.

Sometimes they can't get to school, or home, especially in the rainy season when the rivers flood, meaning they have to stay with other families in the locality. We heard that some children have drowned in recent years whilst travelling to and from school. For some of them, the lunch they receive in the feeding programme is their first food of the day and possibly the only meal they will get. Handwashing is an important part of the lunchtime ritual, but washing bowls and hands in the same water, then eating using your fingers took some getting used to, as did the long queue of children waiting to get in line to



be fed. In this school alone, over 300 children were fed through this programme. In total, over 1,800 children are fed each day. All the cooks are volunteers, some of whom have been there for several years. Meals are not complicated, consisting of cooked mealie maize, shredded cabbage and other vegetables (meat is not included due to price), always cooked over the open fire.

In some parts of Zimbabwe, hunger is so bad that people are scavaging for ants to eat!



Many schools also had a borehole dug to provide water to the surrounding area. Some people have to walk several miles to get a bucket or two of water! Without these boreholes, there would be serious issues with water, especially as Zimbabwe was in the middle of its worst drought for over 30 years during our visit. Fortunately, the home where we stayed had its own borehole so we were OK on that front, most of the time.

After dinner, we had an assembly with the whole school, teaching them 'Wide, Wide as the Ocean' before giving a rugby ball to one of the teachers. It

was like all his Christmases had come at once as they only had one ball and it was pretty knackered! We gave rugby balls and pumps to each school, and they were gratefully accepted.

In one school, where we gave toothpaste, soap and vaseline to the children, they were amazed as some of them had been given a toothbrush three months previously (a toothbrush is meant to last 6 months in Zimbabwe). The celebrations were like England had scored a goal, if you can remember that long ago!

In another school we visited, in Mukombani, where we were to paint the toilet blocks on the Thursday. They need £250 to put a sloping roof on the girl's toilet block. In their senior school, we were shown, among other things, their vegetable area where they are teaching A-level agriculture so they can try to recover their agricultural heritage which President Mugabe threw away when he banished the white farmers. At this school, their outdoor assembly area is covered with straw which keeps the dust 'dampened down'. One of their dreams is to have this bricked over.

We also met a group of widows, visiting one later in her home. Her bedroom wall had collapsed, meaning that she, her daughter (also widowed) and grandchildren were sleeping in the kitchen, the only room left intact and, with the pit toilet unfinished, they had to use the bush! All she had to give us was some Avocados, so her daughter picked some and gave them to us.

We went to the home of a child-headed family whose parents had died with AIDS. Not uncommon. In May 2013, there were 1.4 million people in Zimbabwe living with HIV, (15% of the adult population). In 2013 there were 69,000 new diagnoses and 64,000 AIDS related deaths. Almost 900,000 children are orphans as a result of AIDS, so many find themselves in charge of the household. HIV has moved from being an epidemic to a pandemic and is now endemic. Consequently, a change in culture is emerging. Sexual matters are now talked about in schools and in homes, whereas ten to fifteen years ago, this was not the case. In fact, at each school we visited, I noticed posters about using condoms and Medical Male Circumcision, emphasising the benefits of having it done to reduce both HIV and STIs.



One, in a Head Mistress' office showed a boy saying 'Male circumcision, I've had it done'. There is still much work to be done here, as the take up rate in Zimbabwe is amongst the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa. There is also a need to change to change the custom whereby women can be forced to have sex with their husbands, even when the man is infected.



We also saw a family where the mother was widowed and remarried. The stepfather was abusing the children, so an uncle stepped in to help. A very confusing story, but one showing the urgent need for love and support for the people of this land.

On the first Wednesday we were asked to meet a group of Pastors, so we drove to the back of beyond on the dusty tracks, then went a bit further. We met with ten pastors whose congregations cannot afford to pay the pastors' salaries, and I was asked to say something to encourage them! We shared a meal with them. It was very humbling to be invited to do so, particularly as they gave out of their poverty.

On the Thursday, we called in the bank so Ketani could draw some money out, but there was no cash in the bank! We went to the Cash and Carry, but we couldn't use cards, only cash! We used the last 50 dollar note to buy fuel. On the subject of money, it is filthy if you can get your hands on any, sometimes so filthy that it is hard to see what denomination the notes are.

That evening, our five day power cut started! Fortunately, there was a generator, but as fuel is so expensive this was used sparingly, so when they said 'Lights out at 10.00' all they had to do was to turn the generator off, and the lights went out!

We met a local sewing group which started out as a netball team, but then branched into sewing as a means to earn some money. They urgently need an overlocking machine to finish off their work. There are several such sewing groups across Zimbabwe.

On our way home, I noticed there were a few chickens loose in the back of the truck, which were eventually picked up and popped into a cardboard box for the hour or so journey back home. These would provide us with some eggs, and then be killed for meat.

After he had dropped us at home, our driver was involved in an accident as a passenger, so on the Sunday after church (English speaking), we went to his home and shared communion with him and his brother.

One pastor who came to visit us cycled 15 kilometers each way as he did not have a dollar to pay for the taxi! We also met with a widow who, with her grandson, now sleeps in a garden shed, which is better than before when she slept in a corridor where her food rations were regularly stolen from her. Typical charity rations for pastors and widows include maize meal, vegetable oil, soap, rice and some dried beans. The shed needed some plastic sheeting inside to keep out the wind and the rain, which we helped to sort.



On Wednesday, being Africa day, there were no schools etc open, so we went to a local Game Park, and then Snake World, where we found that 2 out of 3 of us liked snakes and Chameleons, Gwen being the odd one out!

Overall, our trip was emotionally tiring and frustrating, but very worthwhile. I could talk for hours about the inequalities of life over there. Mugabe's houses are adorned with perfect roads, guards, etc., even though he does not live in those houses. One minister in Mugabe's government is building a 63 bedroom house, despite the pitiful state of most of the roads, schools with missing windows, cracked paths outside the classrooms, no furniture in some classrooms, or electricity in some schools, school days from 7.00 till 4.00 with homework to follow, pastors with no income, banks with no money... the list goes on.

People know me as being a bit emotional. Only one thing actually brought me to tears, when Violet was collecting spent corn cobs to use to make a fire. The great inequality between her life and mine became a reality in that one, simple moment.

The investment which the United Reformed Church Children's and Youth Work Committee made in enabling us to go has paid off, our lives have been enriched and so, hopefully, have those with whom we came into contact. Would I go back? Definitely, but would need someone in the Millie role of heading up the art and craft for the schools, as that is definitely NOT my gift!