Kenya

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A Mission Trip Journal
by
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This summer I had the opportunity of joining with 8 other folks for a medical mission trip to Kenya. You might ask, how did this idea of going to Kenya start? It goes back a few years when Peter Mageto, a Kenyan in the US working on his doctorate at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, was invited by my church, Aldersgate United Methodist Church, to serve as a student pastor while he wrote his dissertation. During this time his wife attended nursing classes at the University of Evansville. This was in 2003. One day Peter presented a lecture on HIV/AIDS education to the students at Evansville’s Signature School. He told the students he never had any books to read while growing up in the neighboring villages of Itierio and Ekerenyo located in western Kenya, and his dream was for a library to be built there. Some of the students were members of Aldersgate and they began a community wide fund raising project to fulfill Peter’s dream. Eventually $32,000 was raised and many books were donated, and The Amani Reading Centre was built and dedicated in 2006 in the small village of Ekerenyo. Amani means peace in Swahili.

The Amani Reading Centre in Ekerenyo, Kenya.

Seeing that the villagers needed medical care in addition to a library, the idea soon arose for converting the Centre into a medical facility a few days each year. This all began in 2010, and our trip was Aldersgate’s 4th medical mission to Ekerenyo. Working with members of the village community and the local Riakong’a Methodist Church as well as another mission group specializing in dentistry and providing water filtration systems, our goal was to pass out as much medicine and eye glasses, and pull as many teeth as we could in about 4 days. About 1200 people were served at the clinic. I can’t begin to count the number of pills we gave out, but I do know we passed out several hundred pairs of reading glasses and 250 pairs of prescription eye glasses, and the dentists pulled over 100 teeth.
What follows is a journal of my time in Kenya. I hope you find it interesting and inspirational and I think you will see that your financial and spiritual support of the trip resulted in great gains for the Kingdom of God. The photos were taken by various members of the team; most were taken by me.

It is a long way from Evansville, Indiana to Kenya. Three members of the team (Megan, Lynn and me) left Evansville and flew into Chicago where we met up with three more team members (Vicki, Connor and Jake). From Chicago we flew to London where we joined the remaining members of the group, Bethanne, Cheryl and Erin. Team members came from Indiana, Virginia and New Jersey; most of us had never met before, but by the grace of God we came together as a group with the goal of serving God in Kenya.

The mission team:
Lynn Renne - associate pastor at Aldersgate
Megan Whitt - 4th year dental student at UK
Vicki Brewer - retired kindergarten teacher
Connor Costello - student at IU
Jake Miller - student at IU
Cheryl Gearhart - retired nurse
Erin Gearhart - policy development at the DOD
Bethanne Nazareth - music therapist; teacher
Bryan Lynch - chemistry teacher at UE

We left London for Nairobi, Kenya, flying over the Sahara desert (very cool to see from the plane!). We landed and met four Kenyans who also became members of our team.

The Kenyan Team:
Moses (aka, Big Moses) - driver for Great Horizon Trails Safari Company
Moses (aka, Little Moses) - driver for Great Horizon Trails Safari Company
Isaiah Odoyo - son of Duncan and Pamela Odoyo (Dago Dala Hera Orphanage)
George Odoyo - son of Duncan and Pamela Odoyo (Dago Dala Hera Orphanage)

These four guys made the trip lots of fun, and they taught us how to play “Kenyan poker” which we were soon playing every night. They also kept us out of danger while on safari and when passing through some of the very poor areas of Nairobi.

After spending a night at the Methodist Guest House & Conference Center in Nairobi, we attended services at Lavington United Church where Peter Mageto was preaching. Christian churches have been targets for violence recently in Kenya, so there was an insert to the bulletin that explained what to do in case an extremist lobed a grenade through one of the church windows. Interesting, although it didn’t put a damper on the service, which was very lively, although sedate compared to the service we were to attend next Sunday at the Ekerenyo village. After church we had tea with the congregation and the Mageto family, followed by lunch at an “upscale” restaurant. I was soon to classify places I visited in Kenya based on the quality of their bathroom facilities. This restaurant had a real toilet so it got the upscale classification. (Even so, while sitting on the throne the electricity went out leaving me in darkness for about 30 seconds.) After lunch a five hour drive took us to Nakuru where we stayed at Diane Hamrick’s house. Diane uses her home to host mission groups like ours. We stayed at Diane’s for two nights. On Monday Mr. Afrik from Childfund came to pick me up for my visit with
Left: Peter Mageto and his family at the Lavington Church. Right: a beautifully dressed woman at the Church.

Grace, my 16 year old sponsored child. This was certainly the highlight of my trip! I have been supporting Grace since 2007 and never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would meet her. I visited with her family over biscuits and Kenyan tea (made with hot milk, not water), and then we visited Grace’s primary school (where the students had prepared a song for me!) and the pure water system available to members of the community. I was most impressed by Childfund’s focus on children and their families, with finances going toward much needed projects rather than frills and “window dressing.” I also saw the area of Nakuru where Grace lives, and I could not believe the poverty. All the years I’ve been supporting her I had this idea she was living in a reasonable house with reasonable roads and a ready supply of water and electricity. Not so! The ads you see on TV for Childfund (formerly Christian Children’s Fund) don’t begin to show the poverty these kids face. Grace and I became quick friends; she is a very self-confident young woman, and she told me how well she was doing in school and that she really loves playing football (that is soccer). She is now studying hard for her national exam, which will determine what high school she can attend, assuming her parents can afford to send her to high school. Her hope is to be a lawyer so she can represent and speak for the children of Nakuru. Wow, such an impressive goal for her to set! I was so pleased and so happy to be supporting her. After lunch with her entire family at the Hotel Waterbuck (upscale) we exchanged gifts. I gave Grace a silver chain with a soccer ball charm, as well as gobs of school supplies (thank you Vicki for carrying all this stuff to Kenya and giving me pens, paper, crayons, glue, and on and on). I was not prepared for the gifts Grace’s family would give me, which included a cool Kenyan shirt, bracelets, a necklace, pictures drawn by Grace (now on my refrigerator door) and a beautiful soapstone bowl welcoming me to Nakuru. I almost cried. Giving through Childfund is quite easy and forgetful; every month they take $35 from my VISA card, which I hardly ever notice. But now I realize how much this family appreciates my sponsorship and what an important role I play in their life. I was humbled. And I can’t wait to hear how Grace does on her national exam and the future that awaits her. We parted with lots of hugs.
With Grace at the Nakuru Community Development Center. Note the bracelet she wears with the name “Willy” (the family calls me William). At right is the bowl her family gave me.

At Diane Hamrick’s home in Nakuru. (Standing from left: Little Moses, Erin, George, Bethanne, Connor, Megan, Cheryl, Jake, Vicki, Bryan, Lynn, and Big Moses. Kneeling from left: the house caretaker and his dog, and Isaiah)
With Grace's family at the Hotel Waterbuck. Grace's mother and father are at far left (her father had recently suffered a stroke). Mr. Afrik from Childfund is in the back, center.

Students at the Childfund-supported primary school. This is the school that Grace attended.
We spent most of our time at Diane Hamrick’s counting out pills and putting them into paper bags which would be dispensed to patients at the medical clinic. We also started playing cards, mostly UNO. (The Kenyans had yet to teach us Kenyan Poker.) Evenings of card playing soon became a daily event with the team. On Tuesday morning we left for Ekerenyo and the bulk of our work to take place at the medical mission.

The trip from Nakuru to Ekerenyo was a real experience. Much of the drive was on miles of dirt roads with washed out ruts, rocks and other debris. And it was raining. A trip on such roads is called an “African massage.” Well I guess you could call it a massage being thrown about in the van, but it certainly wasn’t relaxing. After stopping for lunch at an inn in the middle of the tea plantations of Kericho we finally reached our home for the next few days, the Borabu Country Inn, about 20 minutes from the village of Ekerenyo. The Borabu is nothing fancy but according to my new calibration of facilities, it is “upscale.” However, the kitchen uses a wood fire for cooking. I soon realized why; the electricity is notoriously unreliable. I believe we lost electricity every day we were there, once while I was taking a nice hot shower that instantly changed to cold. (Hot water is supplied via an electrical heater at the end of the shower nozzle.) But the bed was reasonably comfortable and hey, I had a real toilet in my room! And the food was pretty good to boot. Later that day we drove to the Reading Centre to set up the clinic which would open the following morning. The side roads in Ekerenyo are dirt roads, and it had been raining cats and dogs that day. We had to pass through probably 2 feet of water at one point, with the wheels of the van very close to a rather steep precipice. But we made - thank you Moses! An interesting tidbit about the Borabu. Every evening at dinner the kitchen would play a Gaither Gospel Bluegrass DVD and we would eat listening to bluegrass music. For me this was surreal; here I was in Kenya listening to bluegrass music. Don’t you find that weird?

The next day we began work at the clinic, and it was indeed work. I spent most of my time using the Retinomax autorefractor reading eye prescriptions for the village folk and matching them up with suitable glasses from our inventory of 2000 pairs. Earlier in the year I had traveled to Louisville, KY to learn how to use the autorefractor at the Kendall Optometry Ministry, which is run by Holland Kendall for the glory of God. In fact all of the eye instrumentation we took to Kenya was loaned from Holland, and his ministry now provides eye equipment for 127 mission teams serving in 36 countries. What a blessing! The Kenyan people were a joy to work with, they were so eager to help me by staring into the autorefractor with eyes wide open. At times they were so eager to help I couldn’t get them to hold their head still, so I had to embrace them with one arm while holding the instrument with the other. Not all the villagers understood English well. Most times when I asked “how old are you?” I would get a reply of “fine, thank you.” Oops. So one of the young villagers from the local church, Abuid, served as translator. Abuid and I soon got into a routine. For each new patient he would rattle off in Swahili, or some other dialect, that they should look into the Retinomax with eyes wide open, looking for the Christmas tree (which is the image presented to them by the instrument). I would measure their prescription and then Abuid would help them find appropriate glasses. We made a great team, especially since Abuid is blessed with the gift of patience. He is at university studying animal medicine. I probably looked into the eyes of over 100 people at the clinic, and some of them were in pretty bad shape. Instead of seeing a nice circle for a pupil, I saw jagged edges or an oval. Cataracts were also quite common. Many of the people complained of itchy eyes, which I can just imagine result from being in a kitchen filled with smoke from burning wood. (I was in three such kitchens over the two week visit, and I could hardly breathe in a couple of them.) But we did our best to help them and many went away with smiles on their faces, which was wonderful. Thank you Jesus.
With a patient at the clinic. I can’t remember why she made me laugh; perhaps it was the look of bewilderment on her face when I tried to explain to her to look at the Christmas tree.

A man waiting in line to have his eyes tested for glasses.
In addition to serving the Kenyans, I had the pleasure of teaching other members of the medical team how to use the autorefractor. I taught Abuid, as well as Len and Susan Eastwood, who work with Start With One Kenya (SWOK). The mission of SWOK, according to their web site, is to "be the catalyst for sustainable transformation in the world through the power of God and through holistic ministries of clean water, health care, education, and microfinance." Susan especially became an expert at using the equipment. SWOK hopes to purchase their own autorefractor which would be kept in Kenya, saving mission teams the headache of transporting the equipment from the states. However, the total cost is over $10,000 so I have no idea when this will happen. We saw at least 300 patients with the autorefractor, and we passed out at least 250 pairs of glasses. Some we couldn't help, their vision was so bad, especially if they had cataracts. Len would say "so sorry" in Swahili, and we would all be very sad.

While in Ekerenyo we visited a primary school and passed out de-worming pills to the students. The staff rewarded us with pineapples and bananas to take back with us to the Borabu. Bananas in Kenya are about half the size of our bananas, but they are more than twice as sweet. We also visited the home and farm of Peter Mageto's mother. I got the feeling that her house was one of the better homes in the area, even though she used wood for cooking fuel. From the photos below you can get an idea of what the landscape looks like; the hills are quite steep, like West Virginia, and most of the folks live on the sides of these hills. Finally on Sunday we attended church in Ekerenyo (a 2 1/2 hour long service) that included tons of music, dancing mostly by the young kids, and even a skit of The Good Samaritan. Afterwards we had lunch (including fresh pineapple, mango and bananas!) in the newly dedicated parsonage. We were treated like royalty during the service and lunch, surely an expression of how much the villagers appreciated the medical mission. After lunch we said goodbye to the good people of Ekerenyo and promised to return for the 5th medical clinic next year.
Top-left: with Abuid and his mother; top-right: women and children outside the Amani Reading Center; bottom-right: Connor with a school girl; bottom-left: two boys (brothers?) at the medical clinic.
The Ekerenyo landscape. This is a photo from the primary school were we passed out de-worming pills. The mountains are very steep and many are covered with tea leaves.
The home and farm of Peter Mageto’s mother. The hut at left is a place for meeting with people. In the foreground is a small patch of tea leaves.

After Ekerenyo it was off to Dago and the farm of Duncan and Pamela Odoyo (parents of our traveling companions, Isaiah and George). They run the Dago Dala Hera Orphanage for girls and we had supplies and clothing for the girls. We also were to visit (and substitute teach in, at least for a little while) the nearby primary school. Students in the 8th standard were studying for their national exam, and Connor, Jake, Megan and I quizzed them on proper English and grammar; we even threw in a few math and geometry problems. They handled most of our questions with ease, although many Kenyans seem to think the capital of the US is New York City. We also visited with the families of some of the girls residing at the orphanage. Most have a small plot of land where they can raise chickens and grow some crops, but the homes are made of mud and dung with two small rooms, and no running water or electricity. Some of these people were HIV positive and one can only wonder what will happen to their children. We met one grandmother who was living with her 9 grandchildren in a small two room hut; a large bamboo mat on the floor served as a bed.

Staying at the Odoyo farm was such a relaxing change from the Borabu. There was no electricity or running water (a real toilet was flushed with a bucket of water filled from a barrel) but the farm was so quiet and the stars at night were awesomely bright; the milky way really did look like milk. And the food was fabulous, the best of the trip. As fresh as could be since there was no refrigeration - the chickens I saw running around in the morning were on the table in the evening. And we sat into the evening under a canopy sharing stories, eating and playing cards. All this fresh food must come from somewhere. If you don’t get it from your own farm, then you go to the nearby market, where you can buy just about anything. We visited the market for only a short time since a torrential downpour drove us to a nearby building with a large awning. We saw people selling lots of vegetables, including kale (very popular in Kenya) and potatoes and also a very small fish, about the size of a minnow.
The Dago Dala Hera Orphanage in Dago, Kenya.

Students in Standard 8 (8th grade) studying for their national exams; their scores will determine which high school they can attend.
A two room mud and dung hut in Dago, Kenya.

A woman selling vegetables at the village market in Dago, Kenya.
Erin and Megan with “Lynn” the new calf born in February and named after our mission team leader, Lynn Renne.

Two of the six dogs kept on the Dago farm; they are let out at night to keep the farm safe from intruders.
After Dago it was off to our “reward;” a safari at a resort on the Mara River. The drive was another hours-long African Massage, but the Ashnil Mara Camp was worth the trip. The camp consists of 40 luxury “tents” located in the Masai Mara National Reserve. It sits on the Mara River which is famous for the wildebeest migration. Perhaps you’ve seen the migration of the wildebeest on Nature and National Geographic Specials - they are famous for showing the large crocodiles attacking the wildebeest as they cross the river from Tanzania into Kenya. The Reserve is huge, almost 600 square miles, and it is especially known for its population of large cats: leopards, cheetahs and lions. As one drives toward the reserve a distinct change in landscape takes place. The mountains of Ekerenyo and Dago with their lush greenery and tea and sugar cane plantations give way to a flat, rolling landscape with acacia trees one normally associates with Africa. Essentially the Masai Mara Reserve is the northern extension of the Serengeti plains.

Although there was a general need by every one in the group to take a shower when we got to the Ashnil, we held off and immediately left in the vans for our first safari from 4 to 6:30 PM. It was good we waited since one gets very dusty on safari. The tops of the vans extend upward and everyone stands up and looks out for big game. Even if you don’t see any big game you are sure to see lots of dust! We saw both. The first day we saw a family of cheetahs (mom and her four kittens), as well as a male lion, giraffes, elephants, tons of different birds, wildebeest, gazelles, waterbuck, and on and on. I thought I was Marlin Perkins on Wild Kingdom. It was fantastic. There were times I thought we were getting just a tad bit too close to some of these animals. I knew they would eat me just as soon as look at me, but we trusted our drivers to keep us out of trouble, which they did. (Note: the Ashnil resort is surrounded by an electrified fence for very good reasons!) After safari we returned for a well deserved shower (finally a hot water valve that actually gives hot water!) and a great dinner.

The next morning I sat with some of the group on the Ashnil overlook of the Mara River and enjoyed a cup of Kenyan tea while watching two baby hippos playing in the River. Seemed they were either trying to drown one another like two adolescents, or they were trying to see who could propel himself up out of the water the furthest. Hippos are born at about 100 lbs, and mature to between 3000 and 7000 lbs. I bet these two “kids” were 500 lbs each but they looked lightweight as they bounced up and down in the water. It was wonderful entertainment. Then a beautiful bird landed on one of the nearby posts and let me take his picture. He was probably looking for a handout, I bet.

After a good breakfast we ordered box lunches and took off on safari again, deciding not to return until 3 PM at the earliest. This day we saw even more cheetahs, a husband and wife team of lions, hyenas dragging their lunch (a cadaver of something - ugh!) and more zebras, elephants and giraffes. The weather was so good and the scenery so wonderful it made for a pleasant day. For lunch the drivers found a place near an acacia tree were it looked like there were no animals around and we got out and had a picnic. Thankfully the baboons didn’t bother us. We returned to Ashnil for an evening of relaxation, drinking Kenyan tea, having a nice dinner, and sitting around a fire on the Ashnil porch. It was very cold our last night in Kenya so Daniel, the guy who took care of my tent, put a much needed hot water bottle in my bed. Kenyan hospitality!

The next morning we were off for the 5 or so hour drive to Nairobi and the flight home. We stopped at the Giraffe center, were you can feed the giraffes, followed by lunch/dinner at the Utamaduni Craft Centre (utamaduni means culture, tradition and folklore). Utamaduni houses many rooms of unique African crafts and I thought they had the best crafts in Kenya (but the crafts aren’t cheap!). Then a final stop at the Kazuri Beads for handcrafted bracelets and necklaces.
We finally got to the airport at about 9 PM for a flight leaving at 11:15 PM. Lots of hugs were exchanged as we said goodbye to Big and Little Moses, Isaiah and George. I will miss them. After stops in London and Chicago, we arrived in Evansville at about 3 PM Evansville time, almost exactly 2 weeks to the hour from the time we left.

And that was my trip to Kenya. Certainly the trip of a lifetime for me. I had the privilege of working with wonderful people and meeting Kenyans living in small villages whom I grew to admire for their positive outlook in the face of what we would consider insurmountable obstacles. Kenya is a beautiful country and the Kenyan people are even more lovely. It was certainly my privilege to be a servant of God to the people of Ekerenyo and I pray God will continue to rain down blessings on them as they continue to grow and progress as a community.

The Masai Mara National Reserve in southwestern Kenya.
My “tent” at the Ashnil Mara Camp.

A cheetah with her kitten. We saw cheetahs every day we were on safari at the Masai Mara.
Every day we saw elephants in the Masai Mara. This is obviously mom with her “small” baby.

A baby hippo with his mother. Hippos can get up to 7000 lbs in weight.
A male lion who obviously thought we were disturbing him; we saw huge numbers of giraffes each day on safari.
The beauty of Kenya and the Masai Mara National Reserve.

I will never forget this place and the people of Kenya.