



St. Paul's Church in Kobunshwi, Tanzania

Building a Church in Tanzania

by Linda Hewitt

Our OCMC short-term mission team had just returned on July 12, 2008 from a second trip to Tanzania to consecrate the church, St. Paul's in Kobunshwi, that we had helped to construct the year before. It was the first Sunday after our return, and we were overjoyed to see each other at Coffee Hour. I saw Steve Kouracos in the hallway. He was busy handing out bottles of hot sauce that he had made himself from Ugandan peppers collected during our trip. I knew that his wife Carolyn had been a member of one of the first OCMC mission teams, helping to construct a medical clinic in Chavogere in 1988. This time, she stayed home with their two children while Steve made his first mission trip. I asked Steve how our journey had affected him.

“It brought Carolyn and me even closer together than we already were. I've heard her stories about her experience, but never really understood why she was so into it. Now I know! Now we can share our impressions with each other and understand why each of us gets so sentimental about it.”

No one goes on a mission with the idea that they will become closer to the spouse they left at home. We all think we're there to help others. No one realizes how much they

will be personally affected and changed by the people they meet, the things that they see, and the work that they do.

I did not expect to be bowled over by the vastness and beauty of the African continent. During our first trip in 2007, we landed in the early morning hours at the Entebbe airport in Uganda. I woke up and raised the window shade during our descent. The sun was rising in the west over a massive expanse of green. Lake Victoria appeared to be an ocean, as it was so big you could not see across it. Strange birds I had never seen before glided by as the plane landed. The soil was a rich red clay that contrasted strongly with the green of the fields and the blue of the sky. That beauty still remains in my mind.



**Metropolitan Jeronymos of Mwanza
carrying the relics of St. Savas of Palestine at the Consecration Vespers
on Saturday evening, July 5th**

The evening before the consecration, we attended a Vespers service during which the relics of St. Savas of Palestine, a 6th century monk who established the monastery near Jerusalem that now bears his name, were brought to the Church in order to be placed in the altar the next day as part of the consecration service. Metropolitan Jeronymos of Mwanza officiated at the service, as he would do again at the consecration the following day. We had spent the afternoon unwrapping the icons we had brought with us, hanging them up, nailing the icon of Christ to the cross, and positioning it behind the altar. After the Vespers service, we all went outside. Without electric light, it was so dark I could barely make out the outlines of my companions. The night sky, however, was brightly lit with stars. The Milky Way was clearly visible as well as many constellations I had never seen before.

“Look,” the Metropolitan said, “how beautifully God has decorated the sky.”

Earlier that day, we had been overjoyed to get our first look at St. Paul’s since our departure a year ago. When we left, the walls were about as high as the bottom of the windows. You could see where the doors would go, and where the altar and apse would be. But now, the church was completely plastered and painted a bright and sunny yellow. A walled iconostasis separated us from the altar. The inside was also painted, but in a creamy ivory and pale yellow that made the interior appear to glow.

We tore open the boxes of icons that had traveled with us. They were handpainted by an icon studio in northern Greece named *Pefkis*. When the studio learned why we were ordering six large hand-painted icons written in Swahili, they insisted on donating the icon of St. Paul. It is unusual to have icons written in Swahili in this area. Usually they are simply purchased or donated, and the language is Greek. These were the first icons to be written in Swahili in this area and we were inordinately proud of them.



The unpacked icons of our Lord Jesus Christ and St. Paul the Apostle written in Swahili for the iconostasis of the new Church

As a result, several of us stood around putting in our opinions on how the icons were to be hung on the iconostasis. The Metropolitan’s man in charge, James, was barefoot and had a homemade ladder. He listened patiently as each of us sounded off on how we felt the icons should be hung. Finally each of us backed off and let James do his job. He hung the icons perfectly.

We then organized the other icons we had brought with us. Father Steven Tsichlis of our home church, St. Paul’s in Irvine, California, had purchased feast day icons as well as

icons of our own personal saints so that we could leave a bit of ourselves behind. Father Steve decided the order they would be hung in however. I was pleased to see that the icon of my saint, Lydia, was to be hung next to another icon of St. Paul on the southern wall of the sanctuary. Once every icon was hung up in its proper place, the interior of the church seemed to glow even more strongly. By now, some of the people from the village had walked up the steep hill to see what we were up to. We opened the doors and a large group of women came inside. I beckoned to them to come closer to the iconostasis as they seemed hesitant to come forward. I will never forget the expressions on their faces as they approached and beheld the icons hanging there for the first time. There were looks of awe and wonderment, some with mouths agape and others with magnificent smiles. I realized at that moment that no matter how much time and effort I had devoted to fundraising and construction, St. Paul's Kobunshwi was their church, not mine. But it was comforting to realize that I have a sister church, almost as dear to me as my own St. Paul's in Irvine, where I would always be welcome.

We did not only bring icons to Tanzania, but the Word of God as well. The children at St. Paul's Irvine held a bake sale to raise money to purchase Bibles written in Swahili and the order was shipped directly to the Metropolitan at his offices in Bukoba. When we arrived there, we saw multiple battered boxes containing 200 Bibles sitting on the grass outside and marveled that they had arrived safely. After the Orthros service, the consecration, and the Divine Liturgy were over, Father Steve handed out the Bibles, one per family, to a long line of parishioners. I was already overwhelmed by the lengthy service and the heat, not to mention feeling light-headed from fasting so that I could receive Holy Communion that day. But it was impossible to miss the happiness and the pride in the faces before me as the hardcover books, complete with full-color maps, were distributed. What is it worth to own a copy of the Holy Scriptures that you can read in your own home and in your own language? As a citizen of the wealthiest country on Earth, I learned the answer to that question on that day. The icons and the Bibles were priceless gifts to the people of Kobunshwi, and I have looked at my own *Orthodox Study Bible* differently ever since.

Hundreds of people were present for the consecration service and the reception afterwards. They came leading small children, carrying babies, and even limping on crutches. The path to the church's location at the top of a high plateau was a steep and winding one. Looking east, one looks out over a great valley with banana and pineapple plantations. You can see for miles. Looking around at the great crowd of people, the Metropolitan commented that "no one used to come up here. Now people come here all the time." The church, with its bright yellow paint, can be seen at a great distance. Besides the sanctuary, we provided funds to construct a house for the priest, and that was almost complete at the time we were there. We have also provided funds to the Metropolitan for the digging of a well at the site to provide the village with something else it didn't have - a source of clean water. Looking around the plateau, there is a large amount of space still left between the church and the priest's house where the children were kicking around a soccer ball. I thought to myself it would be a terrific location for a school. That's the problem with mission work - you are constantly thinking of what more you can do.



The presentation of a goat to Father Steve by the community

At the reception, we were the honored guests. Father Steve was presented with a pregnant goat and a basket containing a family of rabbits. The tribal elders of the village, all faithful Muslims, were also in attendance. The chief had donated the land for St. Paul's Kobunshwi to the Metropolitan out of a desire to advance the interests of the entire village. Other members of the village who were not Orthodox were also present. It was truly an ecumenical gathering.

The goat and the rabbits were transferred to an outbuilding next to the church where construction supplies had been kept. The priest of St. Paul's, Father Gerasimos, approached Father Steve quite seriously on the date of our departure and said with a furrowed brow, "Father, what are we going to do about your goat?" Father Steve immediately gave the goat and the rabbits to Father Gerasimos, and was rewarded with a big smile. They were a valuable gift, as they can provide milk, meat and offspring to sell. What might be considered a joke or an inconvenience in the United States was better than money in the bank to an Orthodox parish in Tanzania.

We visited other churches in the area that were not as richly appointed as St. Paul's Kobunshwi, but we received the same warm welcome. We drove quite a distance to Sts. Constantine and Helen in a neighboring village, only to find that the priest was not expecting us that day. We still participated in a brief prayer service and met the local people there, leaving behind us gifts of candy and beach balls. On another day, we attended a mass baptism/chrisamation/marriage service in a newly formed Orthodox community in the hills high above Lake Ikimba. We climbed a very steep hill and were met by parishioners smiling as we labored to reach the top. The sanctuary here consisted of tarps spread out over poles, but the inside was carpeted in straw and was a welcome place to shelter from the sun. After the services were over, trays of food and thermoses

of hot tea were brought in for everyone's refreshment. I am sure a beautiful church will be constructed on this spot, but I am thankful that I will not be hauling the building supplies up that hill! The view of the lake is truly inspirational.

On the day after the consecration, we were able to return to St. Paul's Kobunshwi for a quiet goodbye. The interior still smelled sweetly of straw and incense, and the walls glowed in the late afternoon sun. A small white bird kept tapping on the glass high over the entrance door while we were inside, then flew away as we finished taking pictures and came out. I kissed the icons several times, fearing that I would not be able to venerate them in person again. After all, I had expected that this would be our last trip to Tanzania. The church was finished, it had been consecrated, and the priest's house was built. What was left? We posed for many pictures at the entrance as well. No one was eager to leave.

Father Steve walked out behind the church to the east, and sat down on a boulder looking out over the valley. A flock of goats grazed nearby. I salvaged a small piece of an adobe brick that had been used to construct the walls as a souvenir. We all wandered about admiring the church and the view. Father Steve remained sitting on his rock for some time. It was obvious that he was either praying or deep in thought. We left him to his solitude while we talked about the events of this trip and how much we had accomplished in these two trips to Tanzania.

Father Steve then got to his feet and came towards us with a determined stride. He had obviously made up his mind to something.

"Well," I said, "what next?"

He did not mistake the deeper meaning behind my words. "Next year," said Father Steve, "we're sending a medical team."



Linda Hewitt
standing
near the icons of
Sts. Paul and Lydia
in the newly
consecrated Church
in Kobunshwi,
Tanzania