

St. Paul's Medical Mission Team Trip to Tanzania -- 2010

by Dean Langis



St. Paul's Mission Committee under the spiritual leadership of our pastor Father Steven Tsichlis and under the guidance of our coordinator Alexander Gorbenko launched a medical missions team trip to Tanzania during the last two weeks of January, 2010. Our team consisted of one priest, two doctors, one physician's assistant, one pharmacist, a few nurses, one photographer and the rest of us lay persons who were willing to help in any way we were able. We also had Dr. David from Tanzania who assisted us during our clinics. We were able to minister to 737 patients total from the six medical clinics we conducted in six Orthodox villages in Tanzania. We had both Orthodox team members from St. Paul's in Irvine and St. Barbara's in Santa Barbara and elsewhere as well as non-Orthodox team members: **Father Simon Thomas, Alexander Gorbenko, Dr. Duane Dyson, Dr. Condessa Curley-Haley, Reginald Haley, Carol Sekeris, Stephanie Petas, Myrlee Cuiching, John Smith, Angela Marzari, Alexander Haimanis, Benjamin Carrington, Ellen Fenger, Kathleen Ryan, Hannah Patzke, Jackie Lovato, Stephanie Callas and Dean Langis.**

We were blessed to have Father Simon Thomas accompany us as our spiritual leader for our trip. Father Simon used to serve as the assistant priest at St. Paul's in Irvine from 2003 to 2006 and now serves as the pastor of St. Barbara's Greek Orthodox Church in Santa Barbara. Following St. Paul's example of building our sister church of St. Paul's in Kobunshwi, Tanzania, St. Barbara's parish is building their own sister church of St. Barbara's Church in Kazinga, Tanzania. We were further blessed to have our own parishioner Alexander Gorbenko serve as our missions team leader and organizer. We cannot express our gratitude sufficiently to Alex for having kept us all together and having attended to every detail of our trip to make sure

everything could function as smoothly and efficiently as possible. We are also most grateful to Dr. Condessa Curley-Haley and her husband Reginald Haley the pharmacist both of whom came with us on our trip. They have participated in numerous medical teams to Africa in Ghana, West Africa, Nigeria, Liberia and Swaziland with Project Africa Global. They were invaluable in showing us how to organize and efficiently operate a medical team in a primitive village setting. Above all, we were blessed to be under the auspices of His Eminence Archbishop Jeronymos of Tanzania who together with his wonderful staff attended to our every need and concern. Here below is a day-by-day account of our medical missions trip to Tanzania.

Sunday, January 17

Today we depart from Los Angeles on the first leg of our journey to Tanzania. At the LAX airport we meet Father Simon and the rest of our fellow travelers from Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz. The only person not at LAX is our photographer Jackie Lovato who will be meeting up with us in London. Alex sets up a counting system for us whereby each of us has a number so that we can count off from 1 to 18 (including Jackie) whenever we need to make sure we have everyone in our group. We have a ten-hour flight to London—dinner and breakfast are served on our British Airways flight. The flight staff is most gracious and attentive to our needs.

Monday, January 18

We arrive at Heathrow airport in London around 12:30 pm. It is 41 degrees Fahrenheit and cloudy. It had been raining. We go to the lovely Novotel Hotel near the airport in one of the suburbs outside the city of London. Some of our group decide to walk to a nearby pub for dinner while some others go into downtown London to see the sights. Father Simon whose mother Elaine was born in England is able to visit some of his relatives in London.

Tuesday, January 19

We all have a group breakfast at the Novotel Hotel and then go to Heathrow airport where we meet up with Jackie Lovato. Heathrow as an airport is beautiful, immaculate and efficient. Because of the heightened security some of our people have to undergo body checks.

We have an eight-hour flight to the city of Entebbe in Uganda. We arrive Tuesday night. Our leader Alex Gorbenko experiences huge relief when all our luggage with more than \$40,000 worth of medicines gets through the airport with no hitch. We are greeted by Abel, Gasper and Dimitrios who are part of the staff of Archbishop Jeronymos. They are gracious, warm and friendly people, and they are hugging people such as Stephanie Petas, John Smith and Alex Gorbenko who had come on St. Paul's last two mission trips to Tanzania.

We travel via one small bus for us passengers and a suburban for our luggage to the Athina Hotel in Kampala which is owned by Maria who was born in Uganda of Cypriot parents. Maria and Kostas from the Archbishop's staff greet us warmly.

Wednesday, January 20

After our restful sleep [under a mosquito net provided for each bed!] we wake up to the sounds of roosters and exotic birds (plus the sounds of motorcycles and trucks). We have breakfast at the Athina Hotel at 8 am with His Eminence Archbishop Jeronymos who is a most gracious host to us.

We then travel for several hours en route from Kampala, Uganda to Bukoba, Tanzania. Kampala itself is a very large and busy city with some scary traffic! It is a mix of the wealthy and the poor—skyscrapers but also slums—and of the modern and the traditional—women with streaked hair and in jeans but also women in traditional dress carrying large objects on their heads. People seem to dress very modestly. The men wear long pants even though it is hot.

Some of our group make a brief stop at the equator—there is a spot where you can stand

with both of your feet each in a different hemisphere! The countryside is gorgeous with lush vegetation. Father Simon and I are traveling together in the vehicle with His Eminence and some of his staff. The car stops at one roadside stand to purchase some fruit and one little girl in a pink dress kneels by the bus for His Eminence to give her his blessing. His Eminence is very friendly and has a wonderful and kind sense of humor—at one point we hear him talking about Mama Stephania (Stephanie Petas) in Swahili! His Greek is also excellent since he studied in Greece for many years. He will be speaking in Swahili and then switch to English and sometimes he will get a call on his cell phone and speak in Greek to whoever is on the line.

After our delicious lunch at the Hotel Brovad in Masaka we travel further and cross the border into Tanzania and finally reach the city of Bukoba where the mission house and the diocese house are located. When we reach the Church of the 12 Apostles in Bukoba the bells are ringing in celebration of our arrival, and the parishioners come to greet us with the warmest welcome. We celebrate a doxology in the Church and then have dinner in the mission house. After dinner we have an orientation and then take out the medicines from our bags in preparation for our first medical clinic tomorrow in the village of Kasikizi where we will be staying for several days at the St. Nicholas Catechetical School at which the local Orthodox seminarians are trained for the holy priesthood.

Thursday, January 21

At 5:40 am some of us are awake to hear the mysterious tones of a local muezzin in Bukoba calling the Muslims to their morning prayers. We have Orthros/Matins in the Church of the 12 Apostles with the local priest Father Spiridon serving and his wife Poppadiya Katerina serving as the chanter and Epistle reader.

After breakfast with His Eminence we make the two-hour drive to the Church of All Saints and the St. Nicholas Catechetical School in the village of Kasikizi where we are welcomed most warmly by the seminarians and the parishioners. After a short service at the All Saints Church led by the pastor Father Gerasimos, we set up our first medical clinic there in the classrooms of the St. Nicholas Catechetical School for the villagers of Kasikizi—we thank Dr. Condessa Curley-Haley and her husband Reggie for getting us off to a good start!! We had been hoping to start at 8 am but we are not able to get going until about 2 pm and we continue until around 8 pm. It is packed with people, and we are sadly not able to see everyone who has come. We see 80 patients today.

The usual set-up for the medical clinic is as follows: 1) we have some of our volunteers register each patient by getting his/her name, gender, age and chief complaint, 2) the patient then goes to triage where a nurse gets his/her vital signs, etc., 3) the patient then goes to be examined and diagnosed by one of the two doctors or the physician's assistant Myrlee Cuiching or the nurse Benjamin Carrington who on this trip served as a "doctor", 4) finally, the patient goes to the pharmacy where he/she will get the medicine(s) prescribed for him/her. We try to keep records of how many patients we see and what their diagnoses are and what medicines we distribute and what referrals we give out. We are not able to do any injections and/or surgeries but have to refer these out to any of the local hospitals in Tanzania. In order to do our work as a medical team, we need translators to translate back and forth from English to the local dialect of Kihaya (while the official language is Kiswahili). Some of our translators are very good, especially a young math teacher named Amos, and others are quite poor in their English skills. All of the translators are local volunteers.

After the clinic we have Vespers in the All Saints Church followed by dinner at the St. Nicholas Catechetical School dining room and then we have a debriefing session after dinner. The debriefing session is an important component after every clinic so that we may review the day's procedures and seek to improve whatever we can for the next clinic.

Although the local diet consists mainly of bananas and rice and beans, etc., nonetheless for us

guests they prepare meat (beef, chicken, rabbit, etc.) and/or fish (delicious African tilapia from Lake Victoria!) every night together with delicious vegetables and fruits such as pineapples (much sweeter than the pineapples we are used to in the U.S.), papayas, mangoes, etc. It is a buffet-style feast every evening!

There is no running water where we are staying, so in order to prepare the showers for us guests, the people at the catechetical school have to take the rain water from the reservoir and put some in a metal trash can and heat it up by burning wood under the trash can and then carry the trash can upstairs to the roof of the shower house and pour it there. Their hospitality and kindness to us is boundless—they treat us like royalty!

Friday, January 22

While some of our group stay in Kasikizi in the morning to continue seeing 34 more patients whom we could not see the day before (for a total of 117 patients seen in Kasikizi), the rest of our group travel to our sister parish of St. Paul's Church in the village of Kobunshwi for the Divine Liturgy. Although it is a week day (Friday) and not a Sunday, the Church is packed, and it seems everyone is singing the service all together including the children! They are there on time even though they have to get to Church by foot, and some of them travel a great distance! The worship is very vibrant and lively. Since the floor is concrete, they spread grass on the floor and people sit on the grass on the floor. I am reminded of St. Ignatius' (died circa 107 A.D.) model of the Church with the bishop and his priests and deacons around the altar celebrating the Divine Liturgy with all the faithful present and participating in the worship. The bishop's throne is a simple chair with an African fabric put over it. A little girl is sitting on the floor next to His Eminence Archbishop Jeronymos who at one point during the service tenderly caresses her cheek. Although we are in a primitive village in Tanzania with no electricity or running water, modernity finds its way even here—during the service one of the seminarians' cell phone goes off! (So this is not only a problem for us here at St. Paul's in Irvine!).

After the Divine Liturgy Archbishop Jeronymos is seated on a chair outside the Church with a huge line of children waiting to come up to see him—I think he is giving each child his blessing and also some candy! The part of our group that went to the Liturgy at St. Paul's in Kobunshwi now goes back to the catechetical school in Kasikizi for lunch, and then the whole group comes back to St. Paul's in Kobunshwi for the medical clinic which is held in the parish house next to the Church belonging to the pastor of St. Paul's, Father Chrysostomos and his family. When we arrive in Kobunshwi for the medical clinic, it seems as if the whole village is there outside the St. Paul's Church and welcoming us with clapping and dancing.

It is a very busy day during which we see 118 patients. There are a number of patients suffering from worms, high blood pressure, pterygium (fleshy tissue growing over the cornea that may interfere with vision—it may be caused by long-term exposure to sunlight and chronic eye irritation from dry, dusty conditions), skin rashes and malnutrition—the diet of one woman consisted mostly of bananas only. In general the people in Tanzania are very “skinny” especially in comparison to Americans. Yet, even though they are so poor and lacking in many of what we would consider necessities, the Tanzanian villagers seem to be very happy and content people. Moreover, even though we encounter so much physical illness, I can only recall one patient out of the 737 patients we see total who complains of anxiety. Conversely, in the U.S. we have so much material wealth and technological progress but what accompanies these is our tremendous stress, anxiety and high level of mental illness.

After our clinic we go back to the St. Nicholas Catechetical School for dinner and debriefing and showers for whoever is not too exhausted to take one!

Saturday, January 23

We begin with Matins around 7:45 am at All Saints Church in Kasikizi, breakfast, a pharmacy

meeting to organize medicines and then departure for the village of Kazinga where the St. Barbara Church is in the process of being constructed by St. Barbara's parish of Santa Barbara. St. Barbara's Church in Kazinga is located on a hill overlooking a beautiful lake with good fishing for African tilapia. We have a treacherous climb up the hill with our bus—the previous St. Paul's mission team last year had to walk up this hill because the road conditions were so bad for the kind of vehicle they had! There are many people waiting to be seen for the medical clinic which is held outdoors in tent-like structures and with the pharmacy in the old primitive Church building constructed of mud and wattle sticks. The parish priest here in Kazinga is Father Philotheos. When Archbishop Jeronymos arrives later in the day, there is a program of music and dancing for him provided by the villagers of Kazinga, but most of us on the medical team are not able to see this because it is taking place during the medical clinic. We are working until dark and since there is no electricity, we need to make use of flashlights and headlamps. (By the way, there is also no running water—all the bathroom facilities in the villages and at the catechetical school at which we are staying are primitive outhouses.) We had the same situation trying to work in the dark the evening before at our medical clinic at St. Paul's in Kobunshwi. This is a well-organized clinic at which we see the most patients from all our six clinics—157 people total today.

There are such cultural differences between America and Tanzania, and yet some things remain the same. My main job on this trip is to keep record of the final diagnoses and the medicines administered and any referrals for the patient. For one quite elderly woman I notice that the age given is only 42 years old. I assume that this is a clerical error of whoever from our group registered her earlier, and I ask the translator Salvatore to ask her for her correct age. Mr. Salvatore asks her, and she says that she is indeed only 42 years old. Mr. Salvatore is smiling as he tells me this. So a woman's true age can be a carefully guarded secret even in Tanzania!

Our trip down the hill is quite bumpy, and then on the main road back to Kasikizi we encounter a bunch of logs blocking the road at a certain wooden bridge. Everyone has to get out of the bus, and then they try to make a crossing over the bridge with planks of wood. The bus starts crossing it, but it is going crooked and might fall into the water! Our driver Mohammed goes in reverse and tries again and makes it this time. We all cross the bridge on foot and get back into the bus for the rest of the journey. Back in Kasikizi we bid farewell to Dr. Condessa Curley and her husband Reggie who need to return to the U.S. the next day. What immense gratitude we have that they have set us off on the right foot in conducting our medical clinics!

Sunday, January 24

Originally we were scheduled this morning to go by bus to the village of Kagenyi in the Karagwe district for a consecration of a Church by Archbishop Jeronymos, but our plans changed so that we stay and attend the Sunday services at All Saints Church at the St. Nicholas Catechetical School in Kasikizi. The Matins begins at 8 am and continues with the Divine Liturgy. Church is over by about 10:30 am. It is marvelous that everyone is singing together and that the men's voice are louder than the women's (we find the opposite in the U.S.!). In Tanzania in the Churches the men stand on the right side as we face the altar and the women stand on the left and the children all stand up in front. There are benches at All Saints for the parishioners. The Epistle and Gospel are read both in Swahili and in English (for the English I read the Epistle and Fr. Simon the Gospel). The parishioners are all singing as they go up to receive Holy Communion which today is being administered by Fr. Simon Thomas. Since it is Sunday, we have a free day with no medical clinic. The pharmacy staff takes some time to reorganize their supplies. In the afternoon some of our group are holding interviews with many children from the village of Kasikizi in preparation for the St. Paul's Hunger Strike in March that is being organized by our parishioner Carolyn Kouracos. There are a number of boys from the village playing soccer on the field outside the All Saints Church. We have Vespers at 6:30 pm followed by dinner. Father Gerasimos who is the parish priest of All Saints tells me that most of

these people are his parishioners and that they should have been in Church this morning, but some of them are too embarrassed to come because they are so poor that they have hardly any money to offer the Church for the Sunday morning collection.

Monday, January 25

After Matins and breakfast we go to the village of Kanyabuguru for our next medical clinic. We first go into the village Church of St. Anthony the Great for a short service led by the parish priest Father Pavlo. He is a plump and jolly priest who is hugging people with warmth and kindness.

Sadly this village has the worst conditions for the medical clinic. The abandoned house in which we are to hold the clinic is in extremely poor condition. It apparently had been a haven for bats, and the floor reeks of urine and there is mold in the ceiling. In this village we see the most patients with worms—they are prescribed Mebendazole to treat this problem. I ask the translator Dominic why worms are such a problem particularly in this village, and he tells me that because there is no running water, the villagers collect the rain water in wells and the water gets dirty but that is all they have to drink for their water supply and they do not boil it before drinking it. The village is very poor and without electricity or running water, and my guess is that many villagers cannot afford to burn wood in order to boil the water and that they are not used to doing this anyway. During our trip one of the translators told me that the average salary of the poor people in the villages may be around \$30 per month.

At one point I take a break and walk into the St. Anthony Church where a group of children are sitting together on their own and singing a song in Swahili with “Alleluia” as part of it. Later on a man from the village comes into the Church and leads them in their singing and then he leaves while the children remain—is this some kind of a children’s choir? We see 141 patients today and then go back exhausted to Kasikizi for dinner around 9 pm and then our debriefing meeting. Today was our fourth medical clinic and furthermore our first clinic without Dr. Curley and Reggie but we made it!

Tuesday, January 26

After Matins at All Saints around 7 am and then breakfast we travel to St. Sosthenes’ private Orthodox-sponsored secondary school in the village of Rubari. The students receive us with the singing of songs including one song with the text “We are happy to receive you—welcome!” to the melody of “She’ll be coming around the mountain when she comes.” Then they make a circle and dance traditional African dances for us—one boy and one girl will dance while the other children are clapping and then another boy and another girl will enter the circle and dance while the first couple goes out. At one point Ben and Angela from our medical team go into the circle and dance. Archbishop Jeronymos arrives during the dancing at which point we all enter a hall in the school grounds for a very formal program of awards to the students. The top five students in the national exams from St. Sosthenes receive presents and awards. The top three students receive a full-year scholarship and the 4th and 5th ranked students receive a term scholarship—all these scholarships were funded by our own parish of St. Paul’s in Irvine. The wonderful schoolmaster, Mr. John Mujungu who is the son of an Orthodox priest, almost starts crying in gratitude for the scholarship for the 1st ranked student who is not present today because his parents cannot afford to send him to school.

After this we drive to Kibirizi which is the probably the poorest village we will encounter during our whole trip. Here we are welcomed by Fr. Savva and his parishioners in the Saints Constantine and Helen Church. Father Savva had signed up about 850 people to take part in the medical clinic, but sadly we are able to see only 97 people today because of the lack of time. Towards the end of the day we invite the parishioners to go back into the Church for a short presentation on health and good hygiene practices by our nurse Kathi Ryan with the help of our nurse Hannah Patzke. At the end some of the parishioners start asking when we will see them

to treat their problems—when will we be coming back?! There is such a tremendous need for clean drinking water and proper medical care in these destitute villages. Alex Haimanis from St. Barbara's in Santa Barbara tells me that his next goal is to raise funds to drill wells for clean water for these needy villagers. After our clinic we return to Kasikizi for dinner and showers.

Wednesday, January 27

This is our last morning at the St. Nicholas Catechetical School in Kasikizi. Thus, after breakfast we take all our luggage on the bus to go to St. George's Church in Mugaza for our sixth and final medical clinic. The parish priest here is Father Spiridon who also serves the Church of the 12 Apostles in Bukoba and the St. Nicholas' Church on Musira Island on Lake Victoria right off the coast of Bukoba. The St. George's Church in Mugaza is perhaps the most beautiful Church in all the villages we have seen. It is the only one with a wooden ceiling instead of a corrugated metal ceiling. In Mugaza we hold the medical clinic outside in various tent-like booths, and we serve 109 patients today. If I remember correctly, I think we see more tooth decay in this village than the other villages.

After our medical clinic we stop at the beautiful Orthodox hospital in Bukoba built by people from Greece with European Union funds. All our left-over medicines we are leaving at this hospital which should be fully running hopefully by October, 2010. We then go to the 12 Apostles Church in Bukoba where we reach the end of the Vespers service attended by the area clergy who had gathered for a priests' seminar led by Archbishop Jeronymos and his staff. Archbishop Jeronymos at the end of Vespers thanks us for our efforts and asks Father Simon to speak. In fact, Father Simon has been asked to speak impromptu on many occasions during our whole trip. Father Simon describes our trip as a "life-changing experience" for us.

After Vespers we have a quick dinner and then a short bus ride to the port of Bukoba where we catch the overnight boat going to the large port city of Mwanza which is also located on the shore of Lake Victoria. We have two people per cabin with bunk beds, and there is a beautiful large moon over Lake Victoria this night. We are so grateful to Archbishop Jeronymos' assistant Gasper [who graduated from the University of Athens as did Archbishop Jeronymos] for coming with us on this boat ride and arranging everything for us.

Thursday, January 28

We arrive in the morning at the semicircular large port of Mwanza with beautiful rock outcroppings around the harbor. From there we proceed to the very modern, clean and luxurious Tai Five Hotel Limited with beautiful dark wooden doors and furniture and with all the amenities (except an elevator!). We are treated to a delicious breakfast of scrambled eggs on bread, pineapple, melon and tea and Tanzanian coffee. For the first time in Tanzania I see salt and pepper on the table (even though the Tanzanians do use salt in their cooking). Some of our group then rest in the hotel while most of the group goes banking and/or shopping in Mwanza. In the evening most of the group go on Stephanie Petas' recommendation to the Hotel Tilapia Restaurant which serves African, Indian, Thai and Japanese food. I stay to rest in the hotel, and Stephanie on returning from the restaurant brings me some delicious "Methi chicken" with fenugreek leaves and who knows what other wonderful herbs and/or spices!

Friday, January 29

We are supposed to meet at 5 am to catch the bus today for our photo safari at Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. The driver is late so we change companies and get another bus and finally depart at 8:45 am. It is about 131 kilometers (a little over 81 miles) from Mwanza to Serengeti. We pass by rice fields and lovely countryside on our way there. At Serengeti we see wildebeests, zebras, one hyena, antelopes, hippos, giraffes (four of them very close to the bus!), storks with bright red beaks, crocodiles, water buffaloes (two of them covered with mud),

warthogs and elephants. The bus stops in the middle of the wilderness and won't start up! We are so grateful when the driver does some tinkering and finally gets the bus operating and moving again. While we're having only a photo safari of the animals outside the bus, we're having a hunting safari with all the tsetse flies that are invading the inside of the bus—people are swatting tsetse flies on each other like crazy! (The windows are often open because the bus has no air conditioning, and it's hot.) Dr. Dyson gets stung four times on one finger—we hope he does not develop sleeping sickness. There is one scary moment during the safari where we are crossing a stone pathway over which a river is running—we hope the bus doesn't turn over and we land by all the crocodiles right next to us. After the safari we drive back to the Mwanza for showers (we are covered all over with the dark red dirt and dust of Tanzania) and dinner at the hotel.

Saturday, January 30

During breakfast at the hotel Archbishop Jeronymos comes to see us and speak with us. Then some of us go shopping in Mwanza while some others go visit the Archdiocese office in Mwanza. After lunch at the hotel we go to the Mwanza airport to catch two small planes to Entebbe, Uganda. Archbishop Jeronymos and his staff graciously bid us farewell at the airport. After staying in the Entebbe airport for several hours we catch a British airways flight after midnight en route to London.

Sunday, January 31

Today is the Sunday that never seems to end—we are spending this Sunday on three different continents! We leave Africa from Entebbe on Sunday morning a little after midnight—soon after the plane takes off the flight attendants walk down the aisles spraying insecticide into the air—I guess they don't want to bring any African bugs alive into London! We arrive in London on Sunday morning and spend several hours at the Heathrow airport. This time every passenger has to undergo a body check before boarding the next plane to Los Angeles. We arrive in Los Angeles on Sunday afternoon with the sun still shining and then bid our farewells. It was wonderful [and exhausting!] in Africa, but it is also good to be home!

I highly recommend to our St. Paul's parishioners that you consider joining one of the future St. Paul's missions trips to Tanzania and/or any other mission trips planned by the Orthodox Christian Mission Center—you may learn about their upcoming trips this year at

http://www.ocmc.org/programs/teams_search.aspx?SearchBy=Year .

It is a beautiful way for us to witness to our Orthodox faith and to serve people in need and also to learn about a different people and culture. It is an experience which we will always treasure and one which we will never forget. We are truly grateful to God for giving us this opportunity to serve Him and His holy Church and to receive so many blessings from Him in the process!

