

Karibu na Tanzania **(Welcome to Tanzania)**

by Nadine Iskander



Short Term Mission Team I leaving St. Paul's, Irvine on July 3, 2007

(Left to Right)

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Day One

Thursday, July 5, 2007

We arrived at Entebbe Airport in Uganda at 8:00 in the morning local time. With only one baggage claim carousel and more airport workers than travelers, we are able to make our way fairly quickly to the greeting area where Bishop Jeronymos is the first person I see. He is at the forefront, his eyes anxiously scanning the crowd until he spots us. Over the next two weeks I learn – we all learn – that a true missionary bishop such as Jeronymos of Bukoba, places himself in the forefront of everything: of hard work, of sacrifice, and of personal discomfort for the sake of spreading Orthodoxy to people who are hungry for it.

The Bishop has three vans waiting to take us to nearby Kampala, the capital city of Uganda and to transport us throughout our stay. Despite our expectations that we would drive to Tanzania and begin work on the new St. Paul's right away, we are

pleasantly surprised to learn that we have some down time upon our arrival. It had been a long trip, and after being transported to LAX in a limousine and celebrating Paul Sardis' birthday in the airport, it has been well over 24 hours of flights, layovers and delays. In Kampala, we stay at the Athina Club House, a small hotel owned by a hospitable lady of Cypriot origin, born and raised in Uganda. Maria makes us feel at home with American music and soda, and is the first to expose us to the East African diet of rice, bananas and beans, goat and chicken. We all dine together morning, afternoon and evening, along with the Bishop and his staff, while reminding each other to take our malaria pills nightly. The accommodations are comfortable, and learning to sleep with mosquito netting and an occasional gecko is barely an adjustment. In fact, the only thing preventing us from getting a good night's rest is the music from Bubbles O'Leary's Irish Pub next door.



***Meeting with (center) Metropolitan Jonah of Kampala, Uganda
and Bishop Jeronymos of Bukoba, Tanzania
at the St. Nicholas Spiritual Center in Kampala***

The afternoon of our arrival, we are driven to St. Nicholas' Orthodox Church and Spiritual Center in Kampala for a question and answer session with Metropolitan Jonah in his conference room, followed by a prayer service. The Metropolitan appears to be a thoughtful, education-minded man who is both visionary and practical at the same time. The ladies of the parish have prepared a feast for us and while we eat, the Metropolitan opens with an enthusiastic, "Welcome to Africa!" After a pause, he continues much more solemnly, "*This* is Africa . . ." and speaks with a heavy heart about the AIDS epidemic which affects 50% of the population, a high infant mortality rate and low life expectancy for his people. The life span of a typical Tanzanian is 47 years old and the average age is 17, with those figures *decreasing*. The Bishop is holding his head in his hands through

the Metropolitan's entire speech and we see in his expression that these statistics shape his daily life. Linda Hewitt breaks our awkward silence by asking what Orthodoxy's biggest competition is in East Africa, and Metropolitan Jonah cites the Catholic Church with its ability to fund "the best schools and the best hospitals." After a few more questions, we end in a hymn. The Metropolitan, the Bishop and our hosts all sing a hymn to the Theotokos (the *Mzazi-Mungu*, or "God Producer" in Swahili.) It is a hymn I have known since childhood, one of my favorites, and the familiar tune – despite the unfamiliar words – makes me feel a kinship with this group of people whom I have just met, who live on the other side of the globe. It is the first of many "moments" I have on this journey in which I realize that the sharing of faith is infinitely more powerful than the sharing of language or culture. All of us who make the journey have become collectors of such moments. The evening prayer service that follows takes place by candle light. As our group files in, we fix our lit candles in their sand stands, kiss the icons, and seat ourselves. The altar is flanked by the icon of Christ on one side and the icon of the Theotokos on the other. It feels remarkably like home.

Outside, after church, the Bishop is joking around with his drivers and it is clear how closely connected he is to his people. He is revered, yet approachable. He dances with his people, knows everyone by name, particularly the children, and remembers details of their baptisms or chrismations. He is organized and seemingly tireless, strict with his priests, yet compassionate. Fr. Steve has commented throughout our two-week stay that being in the presence of the Bishop is like being in the presence of an Apostle. That is the impression he made when he visited us in Irvine last March, but in the context of his own people, his apostolic drive couldn't be plainer or more inspiring.

Day Two

Friday, July 6, 2007

The Bishop has planned a one-day sight seeing tour for us while supplies are being refurbished at our worksite. His Grace is also eager to introduce us to the landscape and the people that we have come so far to see. While many of us are anxious to start working, we must adapt ourselves to "African time," which is even more relaxed than "Greek time," and relinquish our over-scheduled American mentality. We learn that the foundation to the church has already been laid and brick and mortar work is underway. Meanwhile, we spend the day around Lake Victoria with a special visit to the source of the Nile River in the city of Jinja, Uganda.

Linda and I have each visited the place where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea in Alexandria. It is a special thrill for us to visit the point at which the Nile officially emerges from Lake Victoria, and some of us take a brief boat tour of the calm part of the waters while others enjoy shade and cold drinks on land. Our small wooden boat lands us on a tiny island that marks the meeting point of the river, the lake and a natural hot spring. Aside from a few tourists, the island is overrun by school children in tattered blue and white uniforms who are jotting down notes for today's history or geography lesson on site. I overhear one of the teachers explain that the river

water we see today will make a 90-day journey before finishing in the Mediterranean. The Bishop later adds “these waters have been flowing for thousands and thousands of years.” This sense of timelessness and continuity pervades African culture in a way that is difficult for Americans to understand. Time moves very slowly in Africa. There is never any rush and deadlines are unheard of. What was frustrating for us at the beginning of the journey became surprisingly liberating by the end of it.

After a stop at the degree-five rapids at the base of the river, our group, along with the Bishop’s staff, heads for lunch at a resort-style restaurant overlooking the Nile valley. We enjoy a buffet of both African and European cuisine, and it is the only “touristy” outing of our entire stay. Since work is our main objective, this day of sightseeing seems like a guilty indulgence, but we truly needed the relaxation and the cool air to adjust, and the Bishop kindly saw to it.

Day Three Saturday, July 7, 2007

We begin the crossing from Uganda to Tanzania today. A year ago, I couldn’t have definitively pointed out either country on a map, but the stark contrast between them becomes increasingly evident as we drive from one to the other. Uganda is more lush, verdant, and developed. Tanzania is dustier and drier, and perhaps more conservative than cosmopolitan. Only 9% of Tanzanian homes have electricity and few people have a high school education. Extended families live together in large clans and farm or raise livestock to meet their daily needs. Most women wear traditional Tanzanian attire of bold-colored skirts with proverbs printed on them (called *khangas*) rather than Western wear. Children are abundant. The distance between the two countries is short, but the roads are unpaved and treacherous once over the Tanzanian border, and the journey takes us much of the morning.

It is a Tanzanian custom for women and girls to be addressed with the respectful prefix “mama” before their names, and the Bishop confers on us the titles Mama Christina (Kristi), Mama Grace, Mama Jennifer, Mama Linda, Mama Nadia, and Mama Stephania. With our new Tanzanian identities, we make the equator crossing and the border crossing in anticipation of reaching Bukoba. Jennifer Schipsi is the only one of us who has previously crossed the equator, and the rest of us purchase certificates to mark this rite of passage. We shop for souvenirs (the only shopping we do on the entire trip) and take plenty of pictures with one foot in each hemisphere. The border is simultaneously official and casual. We have our exit visas stamped on the Uganda side, drive across a simple metal gate held together by a bicycle chain, then file entry visas a few feet away on the Tanzania side. The Tanzanian officials marvel at our unusual names, but heartily wish us good journey.

Our group is slowly adjusting to the idea of never knowing what comes next. We cannot help but be surprised, however, at our first welcome into Tanzanian society. The Bishop has arranged for us to stop at one of the first Orthodox churches over the border simply because their parish wants to meet us. The parish bears the name of the Bishop's

patron, St. Jeronymos – or St. Jerome, as we might say with more familiarity in English. Father Paul, the parish priest and the entire congregation greets our three vans, waving leaves and tree branches in their hands as a sign of welcome. They have prepared a lavish meal for us in the small, mud hut adjacent to the church building, and we sit down to rice, yams, bananas, beans, roasted peanuts and soda in glass bottles. The presvytera serves us while the choir sings from outside the open doorway. Tanzanian music is powerful and heartfelt, often accompanied by drums. Every community we visit welcomes us similarly with their song and dance, and the Tanzanian people joke – quite correctly – that it’s hard to find a bad voice among them. As we’re leaving, Father Steve takes the wooden cross from around his neck and hangs it over the head of a child.

Day Four

Sunday, July 8, 2007

For the first time since our arrival, we wake up in the city of Bukoba – the Bishop’s official headquarters. The diocese is a two-story structure with stucco archways and hand-made tile. Downstairs houses a roomy dining room, kitchen and small public clinic, while the Bishop’s personal office, conference room and sleeping quarters rest above. Icons (some painted, some printed) dot every room and hallway. The diocese center provides our only link with home, and when word of our safe arrival must be sent, or when the local doctor requests medical supplies to accompany our second team, Fr. Steve and Linda spend an hour at the Bishop’s computer. The Church of the Annunciation sits a few steps away from the diocese center with an open courtyard between the two, and a high, rust-colored gate encircling the entire compound. The hilltop location affords a sweeping view of Bukoba City below and Lake Victoria beyond. There are always children in the diocese courtyard. It’s not clear who they actually belong to, because in Tanzanian culture, the children of a village belong to everyone. The Bishop knows each child and shows each one affection. His drivers and cooks play with the children freely and discipline them equally freely. One shy little girl is told, “greet our guests, Mama Despina,” while the Bishop proudly introduces us to Evangelia, the “first of the faithful in Bukoba.” This eight-year-old girl was the first member of the Bukoba diocese to be baptized as an infant by the then-new Bishop. He named her himself. The children appear equally comfortable with all their “parents” and soon that includes some of us – particularly Grace Verey and Jennifer, the mothers of our group, who are a hit with the little girls.

Half of our group is put up at a local hotel while the “Mamas” are set up at the Mission House further up the hill. The many-roomed house was built by the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus specifically to accommodate future missionary visits. We ladies enjoy late nights in our spacious living room with the Greek music CDs they provide and Greek dance lessons from Stephanie Petas. The washing machine is a luxury and the shelves are stocked with food and cleaning products from Greece. One particularly jetlagged night, when we attempt to enjoy the stars from the porch (the Milky Way is visible to the naked eye), we discover that our door has been padlocked shut from the outside, and the Bishop has entrusted the Secretary of the Diocese, Adam, with the

key. Whether the precaution was intended to keep others out or to keep us in, we can't be certain, but we were exceptionally well looked after during our stay in Bukoba.



The Cathedral of the Twelve Apostles in Bukoba

The roosters wake us in time for our first Liturgy in Africa along with an ordination. The Church of the Twelve Apostles is located in Bukoba's city center, level with the lake. While resembling other Tanzanian churches in size and style, this downtown church holds the distinction of being the Cathedral of Bukoba, as the Bishop's official seat. On more than one occasion, Fr. Steve is invited to give the sermon, which he does through an interpreter, and today cites St. Paul, saying, "In Christ, there is no Greek nor Jew, no slave nor free, no man nor woman," and adds "we may also say that in Christ, there is no American and no Tanzanian." His message of unity is well received wherever we go – and *we* are well received both inside and outside the church. Even the skilled laborers at the worksite, who speak no English, address us visitors as "my brother" and "my sister."

Not only is the Liturgy in Swahili more beautiful than any I have ever heard, but the passion with which the Tanzanian people participate in their worship is astounding. The walls literally shake with the sounds of their voices. Many of the parishioners walk miles to be here, and still every last person sings every last response. The spirituality alive in these small, simply-constructed African churches without question outweighs all the grandeur of European Cathedrals. And children abound in the pews of Tanzanian

churches, particularly in the front where many sit together, and are allowed the privilege of Communion first, even though no Sunday school class awaits them. Even parentless children arrive at church by themselves and are absorbed into the laps of willing adults. Little Katerina attaches herself quite automatically to Linda, and at one time or other, we each have children unofficially in our care. The Bishop has a tradition of blessing the children outside after each Liturgy and handing out hard candy (called “*pipi*,” a term which caused some confusion the first time we heard it.) They line up eagerly for it, and then recede into the hills, in twos and threes, to wherever home is.



Father Anastasios

After Liturgy, Grace arrives to breakfast late and looking uneasy. The resident doctor/priest/monk, Fr. Anastasios, had caught Grace on the way to the dining room and asked for her assistance with a particularly unwell young woman lying two doors down the hall in his clinic. Fr. Anastasios graduated from the University of Athens medical school in 1983 and then seminary in Greece, but has been practicing among the poor of Africa for more than a decade. The local people regard him as a saint and every morning by 7AM 30-40 of them gather in the diocese courtyard awaiting treatment. He needed Grace's assistance this morning in cleaning and bandaging the infected breasts of a heavily pregnant woman, who had neglected her health because the clinic was too far a walk to manage in her condition. Grace recounts with a shiver that the infection went untreated for so long that chunks of skin peeled away, exposing bare flesh, and the poor woman was in agony. Fr. Anastasios emphasizes that what we Americans might term “ordinary” illnesses can turn deadly very quickly in Tanzania because of a lack of basic healthcare and clean water. After dinner and Vespers last night, he presented a slide show that highlights the everyday life struggles for the average Tanzanian. Malaria and diarrhea are the top two killers of children. During our stay, one English-language newspaper reported the tragic deaths of 20 children, ages one to 11, all of the same extended family who died from diarrhea after drinking contaminated water. Even among

the well-fed (famine is not much of an issue in Tanzania with its fertile valleys), a lack of protein in the diet often leads to life-threatening malnutrition in children and anemia in adults. And in very rural regions, a lack of education greatly hinders people from taking basic precautions such as boiling water or obtaining vaccines when available. One afternoon when Craig Williams had been sharing family pictures with our drivers, one of them pointed to Craig's elderly mother and explained matter-of-factly, "We don't have old people here."

We spend the afternoon touring the city of Bukoba, and the beauty of the region lightens the heavy mood of the morning. Either our drivers intend for us to see every corner of the city with its mosques, Catholic Cathedral and storefronts, or they simply refuse to admit we are lost, and we arrive at the shores of Lake Victoria an hour after we set out. Lake Victoria is as large as Ireland and second only in size to Lake Superior. We first caught a glimpse of it lapping alongside the runway in Entebbe Airport, but the Bukoba stretch of shoreline has a beach-like feel complete with gentle waves and a long expanse of sand. Spice Beach is a local hangout with restaurants and clubs on the sand, and we spend some time walking out onto a stone jetty nearby. A tiny island is visible just off shore, and one of our drivers informs us that it is home to a thriving Orthodox community and even has its own church.

After dinner at the diocese, we enjoy a phenomenal performance of Swahili liturgical music by Bukoba Cathedral's choir. They have been known to us all week as the Bishop's personal staff, in addition to serving as our drivers and cooks during our stay. Formal introductions follow with Stephanie and Kristi Craft Nikas taking down names so we can better label and send pictures in the future. We ask each other questions through an interpreter. They wonder why we subdivide ourselves into "Greek Orthodox" or "Russian Orthodox" instead of just "Orthodox" and they don't understand what "secularism" is. When Fr. Steve explains that many Americans don't belong to any church at all, and he wants to bring all of them to Orthodoxy, the Bishop has a rare outburst of applause. We, in turn, ask what their biggest roadblock to Orthodoxy is in Tanzania and the Bishop cites a serious shortage of qualified young men to become priests and minister to the rapidly growing faithful. Tanzania today boasts 166 Orthodox communities, but only 35 priests. The church that we are building will be home to one priest, who must also make the rounds to four neighboring communities – a fairly typical practice.

Day Five

Monday, July 9, 2007

We leave Bukoba early in the morning and edge closer to our worksite. The Bishop has arranged to house us at St. Nicholas Seminary in Kasikizi, a few miles away from the construction area. The seminary was funded by American missionaries, as was All Saints Church, which sits atop the highest hill on seminary grounds. Fr. Steve is personally acquainted with Father George Livanos, the priest in Canonsburg, PA who instigated the project. Our accommodations are dorm-style, with the six of us women sharing one large room, the six men of our team (Fr. Steve, Craig, George, John, Paul,

and Robert) across the hall in another, and our drivers with a few seminarians in a third. It is a peaceful and secluded location with acres of sky, and the communal lifestyle brings us closer to each other and our hosts. We readily share our supplies and snacks with each other, monitor each other's health, and don't even mind the total lack of privacy (with the exception of our group visits to the outhouse, which we have vowed never to discuss.) Mama Maria and her kitchen staff welcome us and prepare a comfortable dining area for us daily. All rooms open onto a joint courtyard dotted with hand-made wooden benches, and in the evenings, and while on breaks, the courtyard provides a setting for socializing, laughing, Compline services and even dodging bats.



One of the children of the village of Kobunshwi

We have just barely unloaded our heavy bags (except for John Nikas, we have all over packed,) when the Bishop instructs us to grab our work gloves and re-enter the vans. Since the worksite is only three miles away, we assume that we are headed for a day of heaving bricks and mixing cement. We *do* arrive at the new St. Paul's, as expected, but instead of bricks, we encounter a mass of more than 400 people waiting to greet us (the Bishop planned to surprise us and hoped the comment about work gloves would throw us off.) School children have the day off to mark the occasion, and they engulf us, waving leafy branches. Some of them have clearly never seen a non-Tanzanian before and can't help staring – but smiling. Stephanie even has several children touching her long hair. A tent shelter is set up (using UN Famine Relief bags) and we are seated as guests of honor in front of the tribal chief and the village elders, most of whom are Muslim. Choirs sing, Mamas dance, and children perform a play. The ladies of the village present Fr. Steve with a gift of bananas, the lifeline of the Tanzanian people. The land has been donated to the church by the chief of the village, who is Muslim. When the Bishop is invited to speak, it is clear why no religious tension exists in this region. The Bishop equates the church with development. He emphasizes to this crowd of believers and non-believers alike that the church will change the history of the village of Kubunshwi forever, bringing with it education and clean water. The Bishop's form of evangelism consists of caring for people's basic needs in the name of Christ. He builds churches and they fill.

And most of the faithful are converts – not only from other forms of Christianity, but from Islam and paganism – won over by a good example.



The foundations of the new St. Paul's Church in Kubunshwi

After lunch in a local school house, we finally do visit the foundations of the new church. Our first official viewing of the worksite brings with it a sense of pride on behalf of ourselves and the entire St. Paul's Irvine community, despite the fact that we have yet to contribute any manual effort. The foundation has been laid in cement, followed by three rows of brick atop it and the outline of the new church is clearly visible. More dominant than the feeling of pride, however, is an inexpressible sense of humility that so many people have come together on this project. The local community of about 2500 (a large village for Tanzania) has 300 Orthodox faithful who fervently want a house of God in their midst and are eager to participate in any way. In a private walk around the grounds with the Bishop and Fr. Steve, the Muslim tribal chief of Kubunshwi donates even more acreage than originally planned, because he respects the Bishop and believes in the progress that comes with Orthodoxy. And the skilled laborers, who have been hired for bricklaying and plastering, work continually with very little rest, and sleep in a shabby, tin-roof structure on the premises. Everyone wants this church. Everyone has a hand in this church. For the year that we spent fundraising back home, this church felt like the mission committee's pet project; seeing the actual foundations, however, redefines it in my mind as an overwhelmingly universal endeavor. Our once blurry concept has completely taken on a life of its own, and even though our St. Paul's structure could easily house three, perhaps four of theirs, St. Paul's Kubunshwi is certainly the "bigger" parish. Suitably, St. Paul's Kubunshwi will sit atop an expansive valley, blanketed in banana trees, and will be visible for miles in every direction.

The workmen have been mixing cement by hand just outside the foundation. There is no machinery whatsoever for the project and each step is labor-intensive. We watch as they combine sand, pebbles and water and distribute it into several large metal bowls which need to be transported onto the structure. The Bishop is the first one to roll

up his sleeves, grab a bowl of concrete, and start walking. Our drivers follow. Within minutes, our whole team is hoisting bowls of concrete, and while we cannot carry them on our heads as some of the Tanzanians can, we do a decent job of filling in the altar area with concrete today. Our drivers' participation in the manual labor was not the ceremonial one-time gesture I had supposed. They work with the Bishop in every possible capacity and participate in everything that he participates in. Sanktus is the youngest at 30 and is skilled at driving, building, speaking English and has a general capacity to learn anything. He converted to Orthodoxy at 15 when his research found "it was the oldest church," and to date he is the only member of his family who is Orthodox. Panayotis is around the same age, an expert navigator, the Bishop's official photographer, and go-to person. He too has been Orthodox for about half his life. (Converts to the Orthodox Church in Tanzania choose a Christian name at their chrismation and use it permanently.) The Bishop's personal driver is a middle-aged Muslim gentleman named Mohammad who speaks fluent English and can't say enough about the impact the Bishop has had in Bukoba Diocese. He, like the Bishop, is Ugandan, and tells me that "Tanzania is very lucky to have him," adding in private that he wishes the Bishop had been assigned to Uganda instead. We learn from our drivers that the average salary for a Tanzanian is \$25 a month, but their good jobs with the Bishop, supplemented by second jobs, yields them a monthly \$45. Our foreman on site, Anastasios, is also Orthodox, and a member of the Bishop's staff. Adam, who is a graduate of the theological school at the University of Athens, maintains the Bishop's correspondence, teaches Greek and patristics at the seminary in Kazikisi and is the Mr. Dean of Bukoba. We see our drivers, foreman, and several of the workmen in church with us morning and evening where they take turns chanting. We travel together, work and worship together, even relax together, and by the end of our two weeks, our drivers have become our friends.



*Grace Verey working onsite carrying concrete
with Panayotis, one of our drivers*

Day Six
Tuesday, July 10, 2007



Bishop Jeronymos of Bukoba ordaining a priest at the Church of the Ascension

We are driven to a neighboring village early in the morning to attend our second liturgy in Tanzania, as well as our second ordination. The Church of the Ascension is light blue and airy, and many of the same priests and seminarians resurface for the occasion. Since the Orthodox Liturgy maintains its structure regardless of language, we have no trouble following the Swahili with the assistance of our English/Greek Liturgy books. By this time, we have even learned some of the responses in Swahili so we can participate as well. The songs have become familiar, too, particularly the solemn consecration hymn that hovers above us as we kneel on the concrete, and the boisterous chant that continues straight through Communion. Stephanie, assigned as our official photographer, busies herself capturing the service from various angles as she does with all our events. Stephanie's camera, as well as her ease with children, has been the ice-breaker in many of our interactions, and she has bounced more Tanzanian babies than the rest of us combined. This church, too, wants to host us in an outdoor reception under a colorful *khanga* shelter. We end up having three meals by noon and begging to be excused from dinner. It has become clear at this point that none of us will be losing weight on our trip to Africa, and we realize with a pang of guilt that we are not living as the average Tanzanian does.

At the worksite, John has the idea of forming an assembly line to distribute our piles of bricks and bowls of concrete, rather than walking back and forth individually. He organizes us, and the local workers find our strategy comical at first, and then decide to give it a try. Soon, even the Mamas who inhabit the hills nearby join in, giggling as they

pass bricks two at a time to the next person. Children with babies strapped to their backs wander out to observe the spectacle. We recognize some of them from the massive reception on our first day, and when we try asking their names in Swahili, we learn that tribal languages (in this case Haya) prevail among those who don't attend school. When it comes to the much heavier cement mixture, the men form a chain to hoist the full bowls in, while the women form an alternate chain to move empty bowls out (with the exception of Grace, who can handle a full bowl just fine.) Some of us attempt bricklaying, but Robert is the only expert and the rest of us are slowing the workmen down. This building project, after all, is an exercise in community, and our moral support proves much more valuable to them than our muscle. We work together in the hot sun for hours, taking breaks on site to enjoy snacks of dried fruit and ice water, and anyone who needs to use the facilities must wander carefully into the bushes, being mindful of the goats.



The buildings of the Resurrection Hospital now under construction in Bukoba

After dinner and Vespers, we are treated to a tour of a future hospital under construction high in the hills of Bukoba. The one-story structure is roomy and sturdy, and we are surprised to learn that it has been funded entirely by the police force of the city of Thessalonica. The surgical equipment is locked in a nearby shed until the project's completion in the spring, and the Bishop has been provided with funds enough to hire four doctors. His dilemma has become where to find the doctors.

Day Seven

Wednesday, July 11, 2007

Our last day of work is the longest one. After our usual Orthros and breakfast of flatbreads, jams, scrambled eggs and tea, we are driven again to the site a few miles away. Hours of work. Lunch back at the seminary. Several more hours of work. At dusk, we notice that our vans have not yet returned for us. The walls are now half-way up and a level of scaffolding has had to be erected to lay the highest rows of brick. The one driver

present informs us that the entire project, including plaster and printed icons, should be complete in less than two months. In response to my worried expression (I had not planned on sleeping on site), he explains that the Bishop, Fr. Steve and others took the vehicles in search of a clean water supply for tomorrow's baptisms.

It's dark when the Bishop returns, dejected, having found no water. We will have to set out early the next morning to drive to a river that is some miles off. And the people being baptized? They'll have to walk.

Since it is to be our last night in Kasikizi after all, we enjoy a choral performance by the local teenage schoolchildren, many of whom we sat with at Vespers an hour earlier. After the music, Compline is held in the courtyard and all of our drivers, hosts and seminarians are present, despite the fact that the service is entirely in English. We can already sense that our two groups will miss each other deeply, and a frenzied exchange of emails and addresses takes place that night. Already we are starting to talk of returning.

Robert shares his idea of bringing pre-fabricated housing into the area to supply priests' homes or parish centers, and John has the means of providing shipment as far as Dar es-Salaam on Tanzania's coast. After some thought, the Bishop approves the idea, and makes our footing here seem more long-term than momentary.

Day Eight

Thursday, July 12, 2007



Summoning the faithful for morning worship at Kasikizi

Morning brings another illuminated red sky and roosters crowing. The church bell at the seminary signals the start of Orthros (Morning Prayer) and afterwards we celebrate Craig's birthday with breakfast. Jennifer has thoughtfully carried Hostess cupcakes and candles in her suitcase in order to commemorate all five of us whose birthdays will occur during the trip, and it adds a touch of home. As it is our last day at the seminary before returning to Bukoba, we spend some time thanking our cooks and caretakers. Mama

Maria doesn't speak much English, but as we're hugging goodbye, she whispers "Don't forget us" in my ear. In fact, many of our goodbyes throughout the entire trip are accompanied by requests to "remember Bukoba diocese." The Bishop himself often concludes his remarks with the phrase "pray for us."



The Ngomo River near the village of Imugaza

The Bishop had mentioned that we would be attending baptisms and weddings during our stay, but I doubt that any one of us could have anticipated the vast scale of what was about to take place. I was still picturing being a guest at a few isolated ceremonies when a dump truck filled with people pulled up to the river where our own caravan had stopped. It is the same dump truck that transported bricks to our worksite and was a gift from the Orthodox Church in Cyprus. The Bishop, several priests, our drivers, over 80 soon-to-be-Orthodox and ourselves hike nearly a mile through tall grass and cow droppings to the bed of the Ngono River in the village of Imugaza. The scene emerges like something out of Biblical days. The Bishop begins the blessing of the river waters amid the swaying papyrus reeds while the people change among the bushes into their white baptismal gowns. A makeshift altar is created from a covered suitcase laid on its side and the censor hangs from a tree. Several priests pray over the catechumens so that once the water is blessed, the mass-baptism can begin. Eighty-four people ranging from infants to grey-haired ladies will become Orthodox today, and the Bishop has asked our group not only to witness the sacrament, but also to participate in it by anointing the babies with oil before their baptism. Our women line up excitedly while our men are a little less eager to handle diaperless babies (Paul had reason to be hesitant as his godson "baptized him back," as Craig put it.)

Once the drivers start handing out babies at random, however, we all get caught up in the moment and soon we have a baptismal assembly line going. Stand in line for a drop of oil and anoint the child with one hand. Take three steps to the left and pass the child off to a priest who will immerse him or her in water. Rejoin the end of the line where you will be handed another child and another drop of oil. I can't say how many times we repeated the process, but we lost track of our new godchildren's names after round one. Craig's first godchild is Felix and mine is Philomena, but the rest remained

unknown to us. Wood crosses are passed around for the newly-Orthodox adults, and plastic crosses go to the children. Afterwards, Linda complimented the priests on their “vigorous” dunking style, and it is no exaggeration to say that the calm children that we held shrieked with terror once they caught sight of those enthusiastic priests, in rolled-up vestments and water to the knee. Simultaneously, several already-baptized adults are being chrismated into the faith by the Bishop and an assisting priest nearby. Last of all, 17 couples of those present have their marriages blessed in the church and the group “dance of Isaiah” takes place on a grassy slope in the open air. Again, members of our team are asked to sponsor the couples, and we assist in switching the wedding wreaths back and forth over their heads. They are honored to have us do it, as are we. With two ordinations, two Liturgies, mass baptisms, chrismations, weddings, daily Orthros, Vespers, Typika and Compline, we have certainly witnessed almost every service of the Orthodox Church in Swahili. As awed as we all are at the depth of faith we have witnessed today, the Bishop informs us that this type of mass-conversion is not unusual. The largest group that he has baptized or chrismated at once is, in fact, 500 people.

Children being baptized in the Ngomo River

Back at the top of the river (the hike up was not an easy one), John Nikas has opened up one of the vans as a first aid station for the local people who have no access to healthcare of any kind in their daily lives. He does some basic doctoring, such as bandaging wounds and treating ringworm, assisted by George Verey. The youngest of our group at only seventeen, George



impresses everyone he meets with his maturity and purposefulness. As a minor, Father Steve obtained special permission from Fr. Martin Ritsi and the board of the OCMC for George to participate on this trip, but his behavior consistently served as an example for the group and for other young people who may be mission-minded. The local people are very grateful for whatever medical attention they can receive, even though John and George cannot stay long. It breaks their hearts to leave.

Our last night in Bukoba culminates with a farewell event at the diocese. The Bishop is secretive when he calls us in to his conference room after dinner. We are all seated around the perimeter of the room when two large trays of local Kilimanjaro beer are brought in, along with a beautifully frosted cake that reads “Thanks for Coming.” Even though we have lacked for nothing during our stay in Tanzania, the sight of beer and cake brings wild cheers. Birthday-boy Craig slices the cake while Kristi and I distribute it. Our hosts had intended it just for us, but we want our last celebration to be a joint one and serve them first. Even the Bishop partakes. As if their generosity weren’t enough, our hosts disappear once again and return with one overstuffed grocery bag for

each of us, bursting with the local-brand coffee, tea, and cooking spices that we have been raving about all week. In their brief absence, we conference about how best to thank the Bishop's tireless staff, and decide to tip them tonight on behalf of team one, and again later on behalf of team two. A quick collection is made among us, and Fr. Steve hands \$25 per person to the Bishop who distributes it to each member of his team as they come forward to kiss his hand.

We have witnessed the Bishop's charisma, his sense of humor and his drive, but on our last night together, he is soft-spoken and sentimental. He knows each of us by name now and looks around the room earnestly as he reiterates Jesus' words at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, "know I am with you always." He explains that Tanzania and America are only distant in miles, but not in the Spirit. He reminds us that we will be with them *always* in spirit, just as Jesus remained with His disciples in the Spirit long after he was physically removed from them. With our sniffles and sobs growing louder by the second, he goes on to say that if love is made visible in good works, he can certainly see the love in each of us. And love changes the world.

Our usual custom is to end each meal with thanksgiving, and we alternate between English prayers and Swahili hymns. Our last celebration ends in a particularly moving Swahili hymn of praise, in which the Bishop calls out and the people respond. It is called "*Jina la Bwana*" – "the Name of the Lord" – and it is so branded in our memories of Tanzania that Kristi requested the words, then hand-copied them for each of us. The Bishop calls out and the people respond. This hymn captures the essence of the Orthodox Church in Tanzania. More and more people keep responding.



The Church of the Annunciation at the Diocese Center in Bukoba



The Diocese Center in Bukoba

Day Nine

Friday, July 13, 2007

Stephanie and Jennifer will stay behind at the diocese center while the rest of team one makes its way back through Uganda to London and eventually home to Irvine. In the lull before team two arrives, Stephanie will tour a local school and Jennifer, who is an accountant, will review the Bishop's books and make appropriate recommendations. After our final breakfast together and a celebration of my birthday, we all share last-minute goodbyes in the courtyard with our generous hosts and with each other amid hugs and tears and waves. Several of us are envious of those staying the full month, and none of us anticipated the separation from Bukoba would be quite so painful. George makes a gift of his sunglasses to Sanktus and Paul does the same for Panayotis. I want Mohammad to keep my hat. And several of the ladies give their church clothes to our female hosts and wonderful cooks: Mama Katerina, Mama Georgia, and Mama Anna Maria. The people of Bukoba have often asked us to remember them, and this symbolic gifting is our way of hoping that they'll remember us, too.

Another equator crossing. Another border crossing. Our spirits are so different leaving than they were arriving. It isn't that the novelty of seeing the equator has worn off; it's that the separation from our Tanzanian brothers and sisters – with their gratitude toward all God gives them, their uncontainable faith, their fervent music, their bottomless hospitality – will be difficult to leave behind. There is no talk of missing home during our stay, or even of missing our families. The people of Bukoba diocese are the reason for this – they treated us as family from first to last. The Bishop must leave us early to visit a refugee camp in another part of the country, but has arranged for us to break our long journey with a buffet lunch at a British-inspired restaurant. It's lovely, but we are not

ourselves all through lunch. The televised soccer game in the background helps mask the silence.

We've come full circle to the Athina Club House where we had spent our first night in Africa. The electricity has been out since yesterday in our section of Kampala, so we pass our last evening in Africa by candlelight. No one complains or feels inconvenienced, which demonstrates just one of the many ways in which we've grown in the past two weeks. George shares his strawberry Poptarts heated over candles, and some of the group extends the night with dancing at O'Leary's Pub next door. It is a perfectly understated ending to an overwhelming journey. In our more lighthearted moments, we ask each other what will be the first food we eat when we return home. In our more reflective side conversations, we fumble to express how we'll be different people from now on. We certainly received more than we gave in this experience, and none of us will be able to take up our former lives exactly as they were. Linda explains that in every African church we entered, she would stare at the same icon of the same Christ and think, "You *knew* that this was possible. And so much *more* is possible." My own epiphany was very similar. I went into this journey thinking it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and came out realizing that it's only the beginning of what I hope is a lifelong partnership between our two St. Paul's communities.

Asante Sana, Bukoba (Thank You Very Much, Bukoba)



Bishop Jeronymos of Bukoba and Nadine Iskander