

Tanzania the Second Time Around

By: Nadine Iskander

I dozed off during the final stage of our flight and completely missed our descent into Africa. Last year, during our first missionary journey, I remember having watched intently as an unfamiliar landscape unfolded beneath the wings of our plane. Everything had been unfamiliar to us then, but the second time around, we knew exactly what to expect in terms of climate, food, and accommodations. Having forged a relationship with the Orthodox community in Tanzania in July 2007, and maintained those close ties throughout the year, the return journey felt like a homecoming of sorts for many of us. Certainly, last year's fear of the unknown had melted into an anticipation to see old friends and finally view the product of our fundraising, labors, and prayers: the newly-completed, soon-to-be-consecrated St. Paul's Church, Kobunshwi. The familiarity that existed on one level, however, was blurred by a different kind of unknown. The question that hung over us through 18 hours of flight time and a six-hour layover (spent largely in a Heathrow pub) was: WHAT NEXT? What would our new mission be once the Consecration, set for Sunday, July 6th, was completed? It was understood among us all – universally but wordlessly agreed upon – that our role in Tanzania would **not** come to a quiet close on Monday, July 7th. Particularly with the spiritual guidance of our mission-minded pastor, Fr. Steve Tsichlis, it was understood that there must always be a next step, however unformed that “next step” seemed upon our arrival into Uganda's Entebbe airport on the morning of July 2nd.

The last time I saw the church, its walls reached up to my knees, and cement bowls and brick piles decorated its four corners. In the year hiatus, I received periodic photos by email, first of bamboo scaffolding and tall walls, then with a tin roof and high, airy windows, and finally with regal archways and bold yellow paint (chosen by Stephanie Petas.) Our Irvine church's entire

missions committee was able to follow the progress of St. Paul's Kobunshwi through pictures, but we anticipated that actually standing in its presence would be quite a different experience than flipping through a photo album, in ways we could not yet perceive.

We had been specially invited to attend the Consecration service by His Eminence, Archbishop Jeronymos of Mwanza, Tanzania, under the Patriarchate of Alexandria. He had long been known to us as "the Bishop," but the vast expansion of his diocese, under his phenomenal apostolic drive, saw him enthroned as Archbishop in January of 2008, and entrusted with a significantly larger geographic region. His energy is only outdone by his humility, and he truly embodies Jesus' teaching that the greatest among us must be the servant. His Eminence graciously allowed Fr. Steve to select a time for the Consecration that would enable as much of the original construction team as possible to return. Of the 14 of us who made the journey in July of 2008, nine of us were making a return visit, including Fr. Steve, Kristi Craft, Alex Gorbenko, Linda Hewitt, Stephanie Petas, John Smith, Jennifer Schipsi, Craig Williams and me. We were joined by eager first-timers Alethea Avramis, Steve Kouracos, Carol Sekeris, Mark Tomich and Christopher Tsichlis.

Monday, June 30, 2008

By five in the afternoon, the St. Paul's Irvine parking lot was bustling with boxes and bags, and a sizable group of family and friends who came to see us off. Amidst the last-minute chaos, we managed to fill up a small bus with all our belongings and ourselves (a much more suitable alternative to the stretch limo that delivered us to the airport last year.) All transportation had been secured for us by travel agent and parishioner Genie Martin, who sat in on all our meetings and made our arrangements as hassle-free as possible. Instead of an official orientation with Pres. Renee

Ritsi of OCMC, this year Fr. Steve leads us, two days prior, in an informal session to divide up our supplies. Missionaries are permitted three pieces of checked baggage on British Airways and we intended to take full advantage of that in order to drag as much medication as possible across the globe. In the course of researching how best to spend our \$4000 medical budget (raised by our June luncheon as well as private donations), we inadvertently stumbled upon Medical Assistance Programs International. MAP International compiles nearly expired medications from overstocked American pharmaceutical companies, and redistributes them to third-world countries where they will be put to good use right away. After speaking with their representative, Fr. Steve was able to obtain \$30,000 worth of medicine (mostly antibiotics) with our original \$4000 donation. Within a few weeks, 16 pre-packaged boxes of medicine sat just outside the conference room, where we hovered over them excitedly. Someone started passing out sharpie pens, and we talked all at once until each box, package and crate was clearly labeled with one of our names. Besides medication, we were traveling with six large-scale icons for the new church and a set of small icons commemorating the 12 great feasts of the church. Fr. Steve also ordered one “name day” icon to represent each of us travelers (as well last year’s travelers) and suggested that we take a moment to sign our names on the back. All medical and liturgical items, as well as a suitcase of stuffed animals (donated by Carol’s granddaughter), toys and deflated soccer balls were quickly assigned to one of us as a “travel buddy.” Chris graciously took responsibility for the last unclaimed item: an oddly shaped, massive ball of tape, said - by Steve, who had packed it - to contain 80 pairs of flip flops. Our personal belongings took barely any space – we learned that lesson from last year – but our gifts for Tanzania were magnificently bulky and we made quite a spectacle of ourselves trying to find our way through LAX during rush hour.

Wednesday, July 2, 2008

A day and a half, and a 10-hour time difference later, we emerge into pale African sunlight for the first time in a year (and for some of us, the first time ever) as a ladder was propped up against our plane. We made our way through Entebbe Airport in the early morning hours, and after a brief scuffle with a Ugandan Customs official (over our wall of medicine, of course) we passed through unscathed to where the Metropolitan's staff awaited us. It felt good to be back and to see old friends again, and we created a bit of a roadblock in airport arrivals with our enthusiastic greeting of each other. All of us travelers arrived in fairly good shape, despite the never-ending flights, and our packages arrived in surprisingly good shape, too. All 16 boxes of medical supplies met us intact, along with the three packages of icons, carefully wrapped by Steve Kouracos, and the two crates of communion wine. Our only casualty was the "ball of flip flops," which despite our best efforts -- and Chris's extensive paperwork to have them shipped to our hotel in Kampala -- never arrived.

The Metropolitan himself had been called away the previous day, and we learn that at least three other groups besides our own will be visiting the Archdiocese of Mwanza at the same time. One notable change that accompanied the name change from last year's "Bukoba Diocese" to this year's "Mwanza Archdiocese" is the astounding increase in workload. "People traffic" in and out of the Metropolitan's area has easily doubled, while his ability to staff this new growth has not. Nevertheless, each visitor is wholeheartedly appreciated and welcomed, and two of the Metropolitan's staff members accompany us everywhere. We spend a leisurely day in the hazy courtyard of the Athina Club House in the capital of Kampala, eating, visiting and planning the details of the Consecration. Some of the group spends the evening visiting another "old friend," O'Leary's Irish pub next door (which seems to be having an '80s night), while a few of us accompany

our hosts to a Ugandan supermarket to help make our food selections for the week, as choices will be severely limited and much more expensive outside the big city. We pile our cart with jams and teas, peanut butter and fresh bread, even soap and cleaning products. Small outings aside, we were treated to a relaxing first day in preparation for our one-day bus journey across the border and the equator into Tanzania tomorrow. We would spend only one evening in the archdiocese center in Bukoba, joining the Metropolitan in his dining room for a feast of food and music, before making an early morning departure together for our church.

Friday, July 4, 2008



One of the buildings at St. Nicholas Seminary in Kasikizi

Our home base throughout the Consecration period was the seminary at Kasikizi, as it had been last year during the construction. St. Nicholas Seminary is about a 20-minute drive from our church and would provide a comfortable, dorm-style lodging for our team, along with showers and cooking facilities.

We have the grounds all to ourselves since the seminary students are away for their summer holidays, and we quickly divide into a “girls room” and “boys room,” while Fr. Steve and Chris settle into the priest’s house nearby. We are impatient to see St. Paul’s, however, and have a hundred details to work out before the Consecration in two days time, so we pile back onto the bus without much delay.

We spent our Independence Day bouncing through overgrown brush and ripe coffee trees in a bus that was far too big for its surroundings. The open windows invited constant flies and gusts of red dust, along with the occasional whip of a branch. Our church is located at the top of a lush valley and can be seen from miles around, so we made every effort, as we drove through that valley, to crane our necks and spot the church from its very first vantage point – to no success. Every few minutes, someone would yell “Watch out!” just as an overzealous tree branch surprised one of us in the face. Finally, as heat and irritability were starting to take their toll, Linda called out, “THERE IT IS!”

Total silence.

Alex added “It’s shining like a star.” It was true, and I am certain that we were all thinking it. All the frustrations of the morning melted into a stunned thanksgiving, and our silence also erupted into simultaneous howling and clapping that might have sounded more at home in a football stadium than on a bus full of part-time missionaries.

The people of Kobunshwi were waiting to greet us as we disembarked the bus. Mark, the tallest among us, was quickly engulfed in a circle of curious kids and we were all met with multiple smiles, handshakes and *karibus* (welcomes). It soon became apparent, however, that the villagers were not waiting for us specifically, but rather just hanging around their church when we happened to arrive. Already, the village and its people had

developed a visible ownership toward this church that we all built together. It was fully theirs now, and we were welcomed guests, a complete reversal from the “star” role we played last year. And that role reversal was a reward in itself.

Needless to say, the church building was stunning. It is a tall, bold, proud-looking structure that is nevertheless very inviting. We later learned that it is one of only four churches in all of Tanzania to have such a spacious floor plan. We trickle in through the doorway, still half muttering to ourselves in awe, and behold a vaulted, beamed ceiling and the still-bare, cream-colored walls. Our three packages of icons are propped up carefully against the *iconostasis*, and we slowly pile our smaller icons, which had sat on our laps during the bus ride, on the steps nearby. The only thing already in place is the altar curtain, which waved a brilliant turquoise hand at us as we walked through the door.

The church was not entirely empty, however. Already inside was a team of 28 medical doctors and nurses from Greece, traveling with their photographer. It was their last day in Tanzania – in fact, visiting our church was one of their last stops before beginning the journey home. We communicated with each other as best we could and learned that they had already put most of the medicine we brought to good use at Bukoba’s Resurrection Hospital. Our group had toured this hospital, located in the hills above the diocese center, last year when it was still under construction. It was fully operational now, and while our Consecration schedule did not permit us to visit, it was a relief to know that our 16 bulky boxes had served their purpose. Only Father Steve and our videographer, Alethea, had been present when the boxes were opened.

Several of the local children arrived, crossing themselves as they entered the church, and we noted that most of them are already wearing the beaded cross necklaces, being distributed by Mark, that our Church School children had made for them during

this year's Good Friday retreat. The Metropolitan led us all in a Vespers service that was memorably hectic, in part because of the adrenaline rush that accompanied this first viewing of the church, and in part because all the packages of icons needed to be opened *during* our service in order to be blessed.



Steve came prepared with a box cutter, and he and Chris took to slicing, tearing and pulling all throughout our “*Kyrie Eleisons*” and “Lord Have Mercies.” By the time the Metropolitan turned to cense the large altar icons, all six of them were spaced along the wall in their proper locations and awaiting their incense bath. This was the second time we viewed these icons written in Swahili of Christ, the *Theotokos*, John the Baptist, St. Paul, and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. They had arrived at St. Paul’s Irvine just in time for Pentecost and had been proudly displayed near the pulpit that Sunday for our entire congregation to see. They hold the distinction of being the only icons written in the congregation's language of Swahili in all of Tanzania, and Fr. Steve labeled them “our tongues of fire,” that reach out to people in their own language. They were beautiful in Irvine, but they were

absolutely radiant here in their proper context. They would be set permanently in place tomorrow, and while we decided on a plan of action, Alethea amused the children with her video camera (many had never seen pictures of themselves before) and Carol shared photos of her grandchildren and pets, hurling the kids into fits of laughter with her animal impressions.

Saturday, July 5, 2008



The All Saints Church at the St. Nicholas Seminary in Kasikizi

By 7:30 A.M., we gathered in the seminary's All Saints Church for a *Typica* service in English and a discussion of Mother Teresa's book, *No Greater Love*, which Fr. Steve had requested we read. We shared our surprise that Mother Teresa had been initially afraid to make some of the choices we now esteem her for. Father emphasized that faith is not the absence of fear, but the courage to do what you know to be right in the midst of doubt and fear. John comments that one of the most poignant messages of the book for him is that we cannot be connected to God without realizing how

connected we are to other people. Our talk is an important one, as we still ponder what shape our future involvement in Tanzania will take.

Craig and I felt a little under the weather and decided to stay back at the seminary instead of accompanying the group to St. Paul's "decorating day." We spent our free time talking to the local children, so I can only guess what happened at church. I assume the box cutters made another appearance, along with various power tools, including a possible Makita. Back at the seminary, Wilfred and Dominic, two teenage boys who were eager to show off their excellent English, amused us with tales of how rigorous school is, with chemistry, biology and physics all taught in one year. They were very well informed globally, too – even knew the name of California's governor – though they spoke with the most pride about their beloved Tanzania. "Sunrises like a postcard" they said, and "people who love peace," but they both worry about their chances of finding work after college. "Tanzania is a poor country," Dominic said. "In Tanzania, you're born poor and you die poor." At dusk, the bus returned with our tired crew. Craig and I, excitedly awaiting the day's report, ended up hearing the phrase "too many cooks in the kitchen" quite often and gathered that between the Metropolitan's staff, the local church goers, and us, there had been more than enough hands to hang all the icons.

Luckily, there were plenty of other jobs that needed doing. Alex and Alethea (a graduate film student at UCLA and daughter of Fr. Tom Avramis of Trinity Children's Foundation) viewed most of Tanzania from behind the lens of a camera. They dutifully recorded every chapter of our journey and we hope to encourage other American Orthodox churches into mission work through the images they present. Carol used her nursing skills to treat one small boy with a horrific burn on his leg. We spotted him the next day, playing and laughing with other children, his new bandage still intact.



Carol Sekeris treating a small boy with a horrific burn on his leg

Steve's wife, Carolyn, sent us to Tanzania with an interviewing project that Kristi volunteered to spearhead. With the help of Carol and Stephanie, she will speak to school age, Orthodox children wherever we travel, using a pre-set questionnaire and the Metropolitan's staff to translate. Many of the questions focus on these children's daily lives and will be used to teach our St. Paul's GOYA about the struggles of their peers a half a world away. This type of education is not a first for our junior high and high school students – in fact it has been the focus of the Planned Famine program during Lent for the last two years – but Carolyn hopes that using “story cards” of *Orthodox* children will strike an even deeper chord.

Evenings at the seminary provide a relaxed, idyllic contrast to our hectic days in town. Even the lack of electrical power adds to its charm, and we adapt beautifully, learning to shower in the pitch black darkness and dress or read by the dim light of the four kerosene lanterns our hosts trim for us. Our biggest challenges lie in the dining room where we're never sure what we're eating, until on the second night, Alex and John graciously illuminate our buffet table with their head lanterns. Each night following, they stood, one on either end of the table, pointing their lights down toward the food and serving themselves last – a gesture which

earned them the affectionate title of “our human lampposts.”

Sunday, July 6, 2008



The Procession around the Church with the relics of St. Savas of Palestine begins

The Consecration service is one of the longest, if not *the* longest service the Orthodox Church offers. John, Carol and I attended the Consecration of St. Paul’s Irvine years ago, but for many of our group, this was their first such experience. I wish I could remember every detail of it, but between the heat, the crowd, and the constant coughing of children, much of the day remains a pleasant, boisterous blur in my mind. I do remember all the entrances being sealed off as we walked around the outside of the church three times. I remember the Metropolitan resting his head soulfully against the thick, rough wood of the church door, then smashing the base of his staff suddenly into it. Then, once inside, the four walls of the church were marked, using tar and a long bamboo reed, with “XP,” the first two Greek letters in the Name of Christ, and the altar was lovingly cleansed.



The Procession with the relics of St. Savas around the exterior of the Church

The first familiar sound all morning was that of the Doxology and Liturgy beginning. The church was packed beyond capacity with worshipers, and even with all the windows open, it was difficult to find air. At the Epistle reading, I sat pinned near a wall on the straw-covered concrete floor, with a child asleep on my lap. Glancing around, I noted that most of our group appeared to be in similar positions. By the time the gifts were consecrated, I found myself squeezed just outside the doorway, with a tangle of other people, including Jennifer, who I had not seen all day, and who was apparently stuck on the church steps under a mound of affectionate kids. Peering in, I could just make out St. Paul's icon, which read in Swahili, "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." I lost sight of everyone else, until Communion created a steady flow toward the altar.



The packed Church

And receiving Communion in this church that we built together was the spiritual high point of my journey back to Tanzania. It is what brought me here, and with all the other gifts I've received along the way, this one was undoubtedly the dearest, and the only starkly clear memory I have of an otherwise jumbled day.



John Smith receiving the Body and Blood of Christ at the Consecration Liturgy



After Liturgy, a stack of 200 Bibles waited on a side table near the exit of St. Paul's Kobunshwi for Fr. Steve to distribute. In February of this year, our children's Pioneer Club in Irvine, under the direction of Laura Leventis and Pres. Katie Tschlis, held a Valentine's bake sale to purchase Swahili Bibles for our sister parish in Tanzania. They far exceeded their original intention, which was to send 50 Bibles with our visiting mission team. Still, with so many more people than Bibles, the Metropolitan had to insist on a "one per household" rule, and his staff also ensured that Bibles went chiefly to Orthodox parishioners, since the entire village, Orthodox or not, turned out for the celebration. Under their direction, Fr. Steve handed a hardcover Bible with a broad smile to each person who stood in line to see him. The crowd swelled around his doorway, however, and for some time we couldn't see Fr. Steve at all. But what we could see were the faces of those who emerged from the knot of people. There were old ladies and teenage boys, mamas with babies strapped to their backs and working-age men – all came out with a shiny, red Bible pressed into their palms, and a look of pride on their faces that is impossible to describe. That look was the common denominator: they were absolutely beaming. Younger siblings ran up to older

siblings to view the new family acquisition. Husbands and wives found each other in the chaos to look down at their new Bible together. Several villagers had their pictures taken with their Bible -- the first Bible they had ever owned – held joyfully up to their faces.



Sharing the joy of receiving a Bible with Craig Williams

One man, who had lost a leg, had a difficult time using his crutches with the Bible in his hand, but still wouldn't release it. In America, it is a given that every Christian home has at least one Bible in it, but for the people of Kobunshwi, Bibles are scarce, Swahili Bibles even scarcer, and the idea of possessing a Bible outside of church is far outside the realm of their thinking. I suspect it was a dream-come-true for Fr. Steve who distributed them and Pres. Katie who

collected them. But for the people who received them, it was something they didn't even know they could dream about. And with that one gesture, the message was sent that faith begins at home.

We could have stayed outside taking pictures for hours had a cool afternoon rain not sent us running indoors. Our small group was expected at the priest's house a few yards away where a traditional lunch of rice, bananas, goat stew and hot milky tea had been prepared in our honor. Afterwards, the entire village joined us under a massive tent shelter for the official celebration. The village elders were present, and seated in a VIP box to one side while hundreds of people filled the floor space in front of them. They motioned to us to take our seats on stage, on benches that had been specially carried all the way up the hill for us from the nearest schoolhouse. We formed a semi-circle on either side of the Metropolitan and were treated to beautiful Swahili singing, drumming and traditional dance. In a show of their extreme gratitude, the president and treasurer of the village ladies' association led a terrified (and obviously pregnant) goat on to the stage and presented it to Fr. Steve. He also accepted a basketful of baby white rabbits and two hand-written letters of thanks. The tribal chief, who had previously owned the land our church now sits on, but turned it over to the Metropolitan last year, finally rose to speak. He wore a European-style soccer jersey, with TANZANIA printed across the front in the bold blue and green colors of their flag. He also wore a white Islamic skullcap. His speech was not translated for us, but his enthusiasm needed no translation, and it was clear that he was proud of the progress in Kobunshwi since the church took root. The Metropolitan's mood was unusually joyful, and in his reply, he thanked the tribal chief publicly "for being far-sighted when so many people are near-sighted." He spoke of the church in conjunction with education, healthcare and clean water. He had spoken prophetically of all these things last year, too, but this year they were coming true.

The unparalleled thunder and lightning display that jolted us out of our beds that night capped our spectacular day with a spectacularly fitting ending.

Monday, July 7, 2008

The day started with a visit to nearby Sts. Constantine and Helen Church to meet the priest and tour the area. The church is a beautiful blue, though noticeably smaller than ours, and housing only two icons. The level of poverty, too, was visible in the children's tattered clothes and inaccessibility to schools. Village life in Tanzania is more diverse than I originally suspected, and this is one of the poorer regions that we've seen. Several mamas and their babies arrive as soon as the church bell rings, and stay to worship with us despite the English prayer service. Afterwards, Kristi, Carol and Stephanie continue interviewing children for Carolyn's project, and are helped by the fact that all the children here are already Orthodox. We are now up to 14 kids (they spoke to a few at yesterday's Consecration), including the priest's son who is trained as a mason, but suffers from a scarcity of work. Linda distributes candy to children as they wait to be interviewed and just as we're leaving, Mark and Chris inflate two beach balls which the kids enjoy just as much as soccer balls. As we drive away, they have already formed two teams and begun play with much laughter and enthusiasm.

Linda asks if we can clear time in the afternoon to return to St. Paul's and "have our own quiet goodbye." As thrilling and climactic as the Consecration had been yesterday, something felt undone. We all shared the need to say goodbye privately, and – not knowing if and when we will see this church again – a hushed, somber mood accompanied us this time as we loaded into the usual bus. The world seems quieter today, too, maybe because our big celebration was over or maybe because the rain had stilled the dust

and silenced the birds and left a great muddy mess in every direction.

And so it should have come as no surprise that while driving over, we got stuck in the mud – really stuck, as our tires spun uselessly in place for some time. First the men got off to push the bus, followed by the women (some in sandals) who carefully contorted our way through the door, making every possible stretch and leap to avoid the giant mud puddle. What happened next is not entirely clear, but somehow, Steve commandeered the bus while its driver was left on the sidelines gesticulating and yelling “He’s ruining my transmission!” repeatedly in Swahili. Local children ran out to see the commotion. I’ve never heard a vehicle make sounds like that, but whatever Steve did worked and the bus emerged from the deep mud. We cheered, our mood completely lifted, and continued on our way, driving through the drier hillsides and avoiding the muddy roads.



Overlooking the valley behind the Church

It was a beautiful, still, sunny day, and our first instinct was to admire the view from behind the church. Many of us strolled

around outside, taking in the deep, vast valley and waiting for our last prayer service to begin. But it didn't begin right away. Fr. Steve wasn't getting a quick breath of fresh air, but had planted himself on a large rock at the outermost edge of the cliff overlooking the valley. He went alone, sat quietly, and gazed and prayed for an extended amount of time. Something in his demeanor kept us all back, respecting his solitude, and his son confirmed, "He's OK . . . leave him." When Father returned from his vigil over the valley, he only said, "Next year, we send a medical team," but we understood that he had much more to say.

Inside the church, John wanted to be certain he had a picture of each of us with "our" icon. After some shuffling and the flash of cameras, the prayer service began with our small group and a handful of locals who worshiped with us. Almost immediately, we were distracted by a tapping at the window behind us. Over the open main doorway of the church, at the highest window, a small white bird kept knocking itself into the sun-lit glass. This knocking continued throughout our prayers, and through the Gospel reading from St. John to "love one another," up until the altar curtain was closed. A giggle rose the first time it happened, but half an hour later, there was something eerily intentional in that relentless knocking. Once the final "amen" was uttered, we simultaneously turned a backwards glance toward that determined bird, all of us a little disturbed and not knowing what to say, until John said, "It's the Holy Spirit." We moved outside the church to take group photos under its huge cross and lofty columns. The bird stayed with us there, too, no longer banging on the glass, just resting on the sill above us. As soon as the last picture was snapped and we all began dispersing, the knocking white bird flew suddenly away and far out of sight. I can't explain it, except to say that John must have been right.

We drove away, looking back at our church until it appeared to be the size of a dot. But we drove away satisfied that this church

we had seen for months only in photos did, in fact, spring into three-dimensional life and movement. It was indeed a living being with sights and sounds of its own, and I will always remember St. Paul's Kobunshwi pulsing with the buzz of many people, the clean scent of rain, and a visible emblem of the Holy Spirit.

And will they remember us? It doesn't really matter, but I'm sure they will. More importantly, God will remember us, as our names (and the names of last year's group and the names of our biggest donors) were written down and sealed inside a space inside the altar during the consecration. It made official what we have long felt unofficially: that we belong here, that we are part of the landscape here, and that we are still very much needed.

Our last lamp-lit dinner at the seminary was conducted more like a meeting, with Fr. Steve outlining his detailed vision for the future of our missions committee. He had answered the nagging internal question of "What next?" and we looked up occasionally from our fried bananas to nod in agreement, and in relief.

Tuesday, July 8, 2008

A new Orthodox community is forming only half an hour away from our church in the hills above Lake Ikimba. The village of Kazinga is hard to find on a map, but already half of its inhabitants had been baptized Orthodox last May when Fr. John Erikson, of St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York, was visiting. A group of about 100 would be added to their number today, along with the blessing of three marriages, and we would witness their sacraments. Slowly, we followed our guides up a steep, rocky hill, *away* from the lake and quite bewildered that the main body of water now trailed behind us. Once at the top, we marveled at the 360-degree views the plateau offered and immediately understood why the people chose to worship up here. They welcomed us with

handshakes and the phrase, “Furaha na Amani,” which means “joy and peace” and is a traditional greeting in church settings. With no actual church to speak of as yet, today’s services would take place under a cloth tent, as do all their services, using two wooden chairs for the makeshift altar and a plastic tub of water for the Baptismal font. Most of the newly Orthodox are babies and small children.



The small church in the village of Kazinga, with Lake Ikimba below in the background

Kristi, Carol and Stephanie managed to squeeze in a few interviews here, too, and it struck me that regardless of the community or even the age group, many of the children share similar experiences. Soccer seemed to be the most popular pastime, and many of the kids have aspirations beyond high school, even though, at present, a high school degree is still something of a rarity in Tanzania. So many kids have no choice but to spend their after-school time gathering firewood, collecting water, looking for food, or somehow contributing to their family’s daily survival. One 10-year-old girl that Carol spoke to had never attended school at all (though she is an exception) and the two high

schoolers I talked with worked seasonally harvesting coffee to pay for their books. But the most common reply came to the question, “Who is the number one influence on your spiritual life?” Without hesitation, every child replied, “*Mungu*” or God, which brought an instant smile to the interviewer’s face.



Nadine Iskander and Kristi Craft interview children at the St. Nicholas Seminary in Kasikizi with Adam Mwesigwa, a member of the bishop's staff, serving as their interpreter

Our return to the seminary was met with a courtyard full of local school children of varying ages. Some miscommunication had brought them here much earlier than expected, and in our pity for their long wait, Chris and Father Steve distributed the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that several of us threw together on the spot, while Craig blew up balloon animals. The interviewing continued, now reaching 40 kids, until our bus was loaded one final time for the drive back to Bukoba.

Our farewell dinner with the Metropolitan was set for two days prior to our departure, since he would be occupied planning the logistics of his coming weeks of travel, and unable to share our last day. In his brightly lit dining room for one final time, we enjoyed the usual feast and fellowship. He spoke to us more

casually than he did last year and the formality was gone from his tone. His closing farewell to us expressed deep gratitude and hope, but also sounded more burdened than we've previously heard. He spoke of how rising fuel costs and worldwide food shortages are impacting an already struggling nation. The hardships that the Church faces now are greater than they have been in the 10 years since the archdiocese was founded. The phrase "Pray for us" punctuated most of the Metropolitan's sentences. It is a phrase that is still ringing in my ears from last year, and one that we all take very seriously.

Wednesday, July 9, 2008

With the Metropolitan busy booking his voyage to Mwanza, his staff graciously amused us with local sightseeing. The Bukoba market is a bustling place where several of our ladies bought fabric in colorful prints, Kristi found roasted coffee, Craig found a Dodger's cap, Mark got briefly lost, and John ordered the regional snack, fried grasshoppers, "to go." The rest of the day was spent at Spice Beach, on the shores of Lake Victoria, sampling local beer, tossing around Stephanie's football, and passing around John's tin of grasshoppers, for the more adventurous of us. We enjoyed a simple hotel dinner as a group, on an airy balcony overlooking the lake, and spent a late night there, storytelling and unwinding.

Jennifer, Stephanie and the Metropolitan departed for Mwanza on an overnight ferry that will cross the lake in eight hours. Mwanza is the second largest city in all of Tanzania (after Dar es-Salaam) and is the new official headquarters of the Orthodox Church. The archdiocese has already acquired a house there, but it will take some doing to transfer all of their workings from the current center in Bukoba, and the Metropolitan estimates a two-year transition period. Jennifer and Stephanie will assist with setting up the new office, and I will join them in a week's time after completing some paperwork for the church-run hospital in Bukoba. At 8:30 P.M., we hear the bellow of the boat's horn from

our hotel and know they have started on their own new adventure in the place that will someday house the new archdiocese center. The rest of the team will continue to Uganda tomorrow, ending our journey where it began, in the Athina House, where the management knows us all by name and prepares our scrambled egg breakfasts without being asked.



Before leaving, I took a picture of myself standing in the shadow of St. Paul's Kobunshwi, completely dwarfed by the enormity of its walls. I wanted to feel how small I am next to this church, and to remember that those things that are bigger than me and beyond me are often most worthy of my attention. Steve returned with a piece of rock from the site (along with a few other things that U.S. Customs never found). And Craig will enlarge his favorite picture of the church and enshrine it with his wall of icons at home, as a daily reminder to pray for the people of Kobunshwi. I am certain that each one of us has taken some such measure to

embed our Tanzanian church into our American lives. We built this structure, and it built us in return. Fr. Steve has said repeatedly throughout this second missionary journey to Tanzania that as a well-off Orthodox Christian community in Irvine, California, we are able to provide for ourselves as well as for others. “We can do both,” Father said. After seeing our sister church on the other side of the world and the difference it has made in so many lives, I wonder, how can we ***not*** do both?

And so we have come full circle from construction to Consecration of St. Paul’s Kobunshwi. And in the process, we made an important realization: the unique element of a circle is that it doesn’t have an ending. After all, next year we’re sending a medical team.



St. Paul's Church at sunset