

The Wind and the Wheatfield

By Carolyn Kouracos

I grew up in a small town in Eastern Washington known best as the home of Washington State University. Pullman is also in the heart of the Palouse – one of the largest wheat producing regions in the nation. The town of 15,000 is surrounded by mile after mile of wheat fields.

It's one of those places where you can literally stand at the edge of town and look over acres of wheat. The view is serene. Rolling hills of farmland colored with the greens and golds of maturing grain. What does all this have to do with my call to go to Kenya and serve on a mission team? Good question.

Well, I was once told that the Holy Spirit moves within our lives much like wind over a wheat field. You can't see the wind but you can see its effects on the grain as it bends and moves to the breeze. The Holy Spirit is like that in our lives. In the winter of 1987 I felt such a nudge from the Holy Spirit. I was called to go on the 1988 OCMC mission to Chavogere, Kenya to help in the construction of a medical clinic. It wasn't a phone call. It was more like an inner "voice" drawing me to go. That "voice" became so strong that when I was initially rejected I still "knew" that I was destined to go. I did go.

In the summer of 1988 I went with 25 other people from throughout the United States to serve as missionaries in Kenya for 6 weeks. I didn't know anyone on the team. I lived in Seattle at the time and was the only team member west of Texas. The team was comprised of 26 members ranging in age from 18-56, from all walks of life, lead by our own Father Martin Ritsi. For a group of virtual strangers we became a family during our short stay in Africa and remain very close to this day.

The village of Chavogere is in Western Kenya near lake Victoria. It was an impoverished community with no real source of employment and only an elementary school through the 5th grade. There was no electricity, no drinking water – in fact the only water source was 3 miles away and the "Mamas" from the village would carry it in 5 gallon buckets on their heads everyday so that we Americans could cook with it and have our *daily* showers!

Some incredible work was done while our team was in Kenya. The construction team worked long, hard days slapping down mortar, making our own cinder blocks (solid blocks that were dried in the sun), building scaffolding, hauling water from a local river to mix with the cement (that we mixed without the use of a mixer), setting in windows and doors, building a roof. We finished the medical clinic within the six weeks we were in Kenya. While we were there our team of two doctors and four nurses worked equally hard days diagnosing, prescribing and healing, providing daily medical visits to neighboring communities and serving more than 300 people a *day*! And, we held our first Liturgy in the medical clinic at Chavogere upon its completion.

What's happened since then is the most amazing part of the story though. This is how you know it was "good to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 15:28). Since we left, there have been several other mission teams that have gone to Chavogere. Along with the medical clinic, there are now nurses' quarters, a church and a high school. The community is now thriving and growing. The village is now educating their children. There's employment and opportunity. They have a future now that they couldn't dream about 20 years ago.

More importantly they have an Orthodox Church as the center of their community. The building of the medical clinic was a stone thrown into a pond that now has ripples that extend far beyond the borders of the village of Chavogere.

I'll be honest. Back in 1988, I wasn't going on the mission so I could spread the Word of God. I instead was going so that I could help others. I thought the least I could do, as a working member of American society and a Christian, was to go to a third world country and build a medical clinic, giving people there a means to get some medical aide. I went with an altruistic motivation but not to spread the Word of God. What a fool I was.

I had no idea at the time what God had in mind for me.

What I thought was a mission to help the people of Chavogere and its surrounding area turned out to be a mission to feed me – spiritually. I went with the idea that I was giving so much of myself to these people – my time, my energy, my effort, – but I left feeling humbled. I left feeling like I received *far* more than I ever gave.

I think that's what happens with Jesus. I think He fills us up when we think we're emptying ourselves.

I could go on for pages about all that happened on my mission trip to Kenya. There was a lot more to the mission than just building the medical clinic and the health care that was offered to people. We witnessed and experienced so many amazing and unforgettable things. I could tell you about miracles I witnessed. I could share the difficult living conditions and the extraordinary work circumstances. I could tell of the hazardous roads we traveled to go to neighboring villages for Liturgy and the incredible faith the Orthodox of Kenya have. How can one forget seeing Orthodox Africans arrive at Liturgy after walking *five* miles – in bare feet? And they got there *before Orthros*! How can one forget having an *entire* village singing to you as the team walked the last half-mile toward the church to celebrate Liturgy one Sunday morning? I cannot describe how beautiful the Liturgy is sung in Swahili. How can one forget the warm welcome we received in Chavogere from the villagers as they brought baskets of fruit and vegetables, a chicken and a goat? Or the dancing and singing and celebrating we received from every parish we visited? The faith and the joy of the Orthodox in Africa is amazing and humbling.

I could go on and on telling you about the amazing experience it was and the people in Kenya that touched our lives forever.

I could...but in some way though, I think then it would turn out to be a story about me. It really isn't about me. It's about Jesus. He called us to care for the poor and the orphans and the sick (Matthew 25:31-46). He called us to bring his message to all nations (Matthew 28:19). He asks us to put aside our self and have compassion for others.

Do you see how the Holy Spirit moves within my life? First, Jesus calls me to go to Africa. I go. Then I meet and marry my wonderful husband, Steve, who brings me to Orange County. We join St. Paul's and find Father Martin once again. Father Steve comes from Seattle, knowing of my mission in 1988 – in fact, the Assumption, his parish in Seattle, was a major contributor to my fundraising efforts. And now St. Paul's is on the threshold of starting a church in Africa. It's come full circle it seems.

Much like the wheat field and the wind, I still see the Holy Spirit moving in my life, drawing me again to answer Jesus' call to go to all nations and bring His message. I know we live a charmed life here in Orange County. We want for nothing. The challenge is to "*put down our nets and follow*" Him (Mark 1:18). As St. Paul's Mission Committee

begins work to establish a church in Africa, my hope is that we all listen for that call. But more importantly, that we answer it!



The Kouracos family: Steve, Marissa, Nicholas and Carolyn