

July 2010

News from Rwamagana Lutheran School

Peter, our English-History teacher, was sitting at the back of the room in May as teams of students presented their findings about the various creation stories of religions around the world. As one boy slogged through a text about Pan Ku in the Taoist tradition, Peter demanded, “Are you reading? Or is this a summary?” The boy put the text down and proceeded to tell us about yin and yang as forces of nature that must always form a balance. His language was confident and clear and I was a bit astonished because a year ago he couldn’t understand a simple question about where he ate lunch.

By the same token, Odette asked a question of the team after they finished their presentation and she received a vague answer. She wrinkled her nose and Peter asked, “Are you satisfied with the answer?”

“No.”

“Can someone support Rita’s answer with some more information?”

Someone did and Odette nodded okay.

It showed me that students are learning much more than English—which is, of course, the goal: they are also learning how to learn. This is one of the things that is often missing from education in Rwandan schools, not because teachers don’t care, but because they lack training and resources to teach in other ways. I see our teachers trying new pedagogical methods with good success.

We had our first “Intensives,” an Expeditionary Learning term that refers to some days at the end of the term which focus on academic tutoring and non-academic subjects like (in our case) knitting, volleyball, bird watching, drama, and board games. For students, it’s a chance to talk with teachers in a more informal setting and a chance for them to try out some new activities and once again, it helps us focus on our sense of school community.

I’m deeply impressed with the teachers’ and staff’s sense of teamwork and commitment. We find that we enjoy each other’s company on the job and that helps to ensure a good environment for students. Meanwhile, we’ve been studying methods of assessment, ways to improve our teaching of reading and ways to make Entrepreneurship class more “hands on”. In the long term, we hope that students’ entrepreneurship projects will help to earn some income for the school and also give them skills for the “real world” after they graduate. Right now we’re looking into raising some chickens for eggs to provide protein in our lunch.

Building continues! Alex and his team are now plastering walls and installing doors and windows. Each window frame and panel is welded by hand, which saves money over pre-fabricated units. Visitors are impressed by the view of the farm fields in the valley below. If we can finish the water tank, septic system and the interior of at least four rooms, we can move in from our rented quarters. We’re all anxious to get into our own space (and save money on rent!) We finally feel that we can see light at the end of the tunnel!

Last month a police team came to talk to students at both School of Champions and our school about

sexual harassment. It's part of a wider campaign to increase gender equality and human rights awareness. For many students in the two schools, I think it was good for them to hear that some of what had happened to them on the streets should not be tolerated in society.



Many of our **students continue to have significant struggles**. We know of a few who are not getting regular meals outside of school and some whose family circumstances are constantly on the edge because of illness, hospitalization and unemployment. This past week, we were all saddened by the death of the mother of one of our students. She was a vibrant church leader and a caring neighbor and friendly auntie to many in the community and three of the teachers and about half of the students attended her funeral. Her daughter called me the next day and told me that she can't attend school now as she is the oldest of the five children. We plan to meet with the family and work out the best

arrangement for her, whether it will be taking a year off or managing some home studies. I am often humbled by the challenges students manage.

For me personally, I think one of the biggest frustrations is the bureaucratic foot-dragging regarding our local **NGO status**. Sometimes it's the arrogance of a petty official (I've got the stamp of approval you need) and sometimes it's due to lack of capacity: not enough skilled secretarial staff, managers and administrators to do the job efficiently. It's one area where nationwide poverty hits hard because it's hard to push someone on crutches to run faster. Metaphorically speaking, despite enormous effort by the government and many dedicated people, Rwanda is still suffering from systems that are catching up after years of neglect or, in some cases, after never existing before. The current spate of classroom building is still making up for the fact that the previous government didn't even build schools in every district since education was politically motivated.

But we are also refreshed with big doses of love and hope. In the beginning of July, we were invigorated and blessed to **have 25 youth leaders and adults visiting from Sierra Pacific Synod in California**. They got off the bus to greet our students and from the first moment, we never had to remind either group to "get in there and mix."... They did so joyfully and naturally, dancing Rwandan traditional dances, eating lunch, carrying construction materials, and painting walls of our new classrooms. At the end, there were songs and tears and hugs and promises to send email. We truly had a sense of the wider community we are a part of and it was meaningful to all of us. Our thanks to **the SPYSC** for their journey here!



I also just finished **a journey back to the USA**. It is always a journey of both physical and spiritual renewal. I was especially pleased to visit a number of different Lutheran churches, including Holy Redeemer and Grace Evergreen (San Jose, CA), Community Lutheran Church in Sterling, VA and Holy Trinity Lutheran in Chicago, IL. Especially exciting was the fact that teacher **Jeanne Mukangenzi**, our math and science teacher, was able to come too. Through the generosity of a board member, she was able to get free miles for her ticket and we both attended an Expeditionary Learning Site Seminar in New York. Other highlights were a visit to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC and Meadow

Robin, Jeanne, and Grace Evergreen women

Primary School in Petaluma, CA, where we got to see terrific staff cooperation and lots of creative teaching. We came back not only with new ideas for science teaching, ways to promote reading and a host of other specific things to try, but we also came back with some wonderful new friendships. Thank you to everyone who made that trip possible with hospitality, finance, prayer, time and food.

We have some requests for our readers:

1. Is there anyone out there who can help us buy a discounted version of QUICKBOOKS?
2. Is there anyone who has any special advice on the proper care of egg-laying CHICKENS?

and finally

3. Does anyone have a USED PROJECTOR (the type that can hook up to a laptop computer) that they might donate or sell to us?

Grace and peace!

Robin Strickler

If you'd like to know more about the work of ELCA missionaries, you can read about them at <http://www2.elca.org/globalmission/who.html>.