

KENYA JOURNAL

8th – 23rd August 2005

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Preface

As with the previous journal I wrote for our trip to The Gambia in August 2000, I shall simply write down what happens, and record my impressions as I go along. Although these are *my own* thoughts, I hope that the narrative will be a resource for those who have taken part and who will be giving talks and presentations in support of the project in the future. As I write these words, we have arrived in Kenya and are recovering in the Methodist Guest House & Conference Centre in Nairobi, and planning to get an early night, as we are due to leave for Meru at the crack of dawn tomorrow.

But to begin at the very beginning. In August 2000 a party from the Woking & Walton Circuit (most of whom came from Trinity, where I was previously the Minister) together with a small group from Christ Church with St Philip, Worcester Park, spent two weeks in The Gambia, on a project in Makumba-Ya, one of the villages there. Following this, a number of the older teenagers at Worcester Park expressed a strong interest in going themselves. However, as time went on, a return visit became increasingly problematical for a number of reasons, and – with the arrival of John and Faith Nyota in August 2003 – it seemed logical to turn our attention to East, rather than West Africa.

I asked John and Faith whether there might be an opportunity to develop a project of some kind in partnership with Methodists in Kenya, and very quickly it became clear that there was considerable scope for one in the Meru District, situated near Mt Kenya, some distance north of Nairobi. In November (2003) John came to Worcester Park one Sunday evening to speak to ‘Vivente’ – our teenagers’ group at the church, and considerable interest was shown in the idea of forming a group to go to Kenya in 2005. Alas, within a month of that exciting beginning, I had been diagnosed with cancer; in February underwent major surgery and – to cut a long story short – had nearly eight of the next fifteen months off work with various complications and health problems. In the mean time, the project (which was to become known as the **Toto (Baby) Simba** Project) developed into a fully-fledged scheme, and a registered charity known as the **Rafiki Trust** formed. The word ‘rafiki’ simply means ‘friend’.

The Aims of the Project

1. To build a partnership for mission between the Wimbledon Circuit and Baraimu.
2. To create new friendships and links between our respective communities.
3. To expose our people to a part of the global Methodist family.
4. To establish a precedent that can be continued in the years to come with future trips.

What does the visit involve?

1. To assist in the building (under the supervision of the Kenyan contractors) of a multi-purpose building at Baraimu, called the Wesley Empowerment Centre. This will consist of two classrooms and an office, and be a school providing basic general education for children and also course in such things as carpentry, masonry, tie and dye, farming, tailoring and African crafts for older students. When not used as a school, the building will be a community centre, offering meals and health care for the scattered village.
2. To assist with children's work in the church school at Baraimu – reading, painting, cooking.

How much practical work we can do remains to be seen. On the evidence of what we were able to achieve in The Gambia, I doubt whether it will be much – but I see this as the start of something bigger which will grow in time. And, of course, Martin Way (Methodist Church) have already become involved in sponsorship of children's education – a side of the venture which has much potential for future development.

All this has made it interesting for me in a number of respects, i.e.

- Whilst comparisons with my experiences in The Gambia are informative and helpful, I must be *very* careful not to weary my fellow travellers with anecdotes beginning with the words, "*When we were in The Gambia, we...*".
- The other thing is quite personal. I have had to come to terms with the fact that the project has developed *without* me, and in ways which I hadn't altogether envisaged. It has made me realise that perhaps I am more of a control freak than I had originally thought! In some ways it has been quite hard to join something which was already in full swing, and I must find ways of owning the project myself.

So, what will this trip achieve? My own view is that it will be a 'taster'. There will simply not be sufficient time at Buraimu to do a great deal, apart from introduce ourselves, make contacts and friends, and to learn something about the local situation. I would have preferred to have spent much more time on the project and less time in Mombasa, but whereas it is not a holiday for *me*, it is a holiday (to a certain extent) for many of the others. But what *is* certain is that for *all* of us it will be a learning experience. My guess also is that, by the time we move on to Mombasa at the beginning of the second week, we will have a much clearer idea in our minds as to how the Toto Simba Project can be developed.

One other reason for me personally going is that, with two Kenyan colleagues in the Wimbledon Circuit, I really feel that I should visit *their* home. I know that we made a conscious decision to request a World Church partner in our circuit from 2003, but John and Faith have left their own country for (at least) five years, and brought Njeri and Kimathi (they are now known by their anglicised names of 'Cherie' and 'Kim') with them – which is a huge undertaking and a sign of great faith and commitment to the Church. The least I can do, as their Superintendent Minister, is to spend a little time in Kenya, so that I can better understand their situation and therefore be a better friend and colleague to them. We have grown to love them both in the Wimbledon Circuit (and Njeri and Kimathi, of course) and the very least we can do is to respond to their commitment with commitment of our own.

Incidentally, one of the differences between this journal and the one I wrote five years ago, is that few of those who went actually read it, though many others did. If you were one of the party, then you will probably find that I've missed out lots of things which were important to *you*. Sorry about this! I have tried to record other people's reactions and comments, but these are – inevitably – my own recollections and perspectives.

Enough of the preamble. Here's my account of what happened.

Monday 8th August

We assemble at Heathrow late afternoon and gradually went through the departure procedures. Unfortunately it wasn't possible to have a group photograph and I wonder how quickly we will gel as a group. We are from quite a number of different churches (indeed, not all from the Wimbledon Circuit – Martin and Una Alexander are from Epsom, Leo and Elaine Verhaag come from a village

near Northampton) and Peter Redway is a friend of Margaret Sephton, who has come in on the trip at the last moment. Although most of the group have been meeting at regular times before today, bonding together hasn't been easy, and I can't remember an occasion when we spent time introducing ourselves and getting to know each other. I still worry a little because I still don't really know every member of the party – though I suppose my lengthy absences from work make this understandable.

The flight leaves 10 minutes earlier (!) than it's advertised time of 8.00 pm. It's an eight and a half hour flight, but the plane (a Boeing 777) is modern and well-equipped and Kenya Airlines take excellent care of us. We arrive at Jomo Kenyatta Airport, on the outskirts of Nairobi, at 6.15 am local time – which is two hours ahead of GMT. Most of us manage to get a little sleep on the flight, but it's only fitful, and we're all pretty tired on our arrival.

Tuesday 9th August

Here we are! Nairobi is a huge, sprawling metropolis, far bigger than I had imagined. Since it now has a population of well over 3 million, this is not surprising. The centre is extremely busy and very modern, but the outskirts – at least, those that we drive through – show evidence of real poverty. There are miles and miles of shacks, some with rough stone walls, and almost all with corrugated iron roofs.

We are transported by minibus to the Methodist Guest House and Conference Centre in Nairobi where we are to spend one night. It is a huge complex, opened about fifteen years ago. The rooms are very basic but clean; the food is limited in range but plentiful and extremely well cooked and presented. Everyone goes out of their way to be helpful and all the staff are courteous, efficient and friendly.

Our arrival, we are met by the Presiding Bishop (of the Methodist Church) of Kenya, **Rev Stephen Kanyaru**. In Kenya, by the way, bishops serve for an initial five year term, unlike (Anglican) bishops in Britain. Also, because Kenya has a secular president, the Methodist Church cannot have a *President* of Conference, as such, as no one apart from the head of state is allowed to use the title. Hence the term 'Presiding Bishop'. He welcomes us warmly and speaks of what he sees as Kenya's primary needs – people to help with theological education and more resources to enable people to be trained for the Methodist ministry. Stephen talks very movingly about the way in which, after his parents had died whilst he was still a very young child, Christians in Britain had sponsored his education. Put simply, he says that without this support he would not be standing in front of us today.

We also have a chance to meet the Assistant Minister of Education, **Dr Kilemi Mwiria**, who gives us a typical politician's speech but comes across as a very genuine person with the interests of his people at heart. Hopefully we shall see him again when the project at Baraimu is officially launched.

In the afternoon we visit the church where John Nyota used to be the minister – St. Peter's Methodist Church. Luckily, the current minister, **Rev Richard Muguongo** is on site and is able to show us round. The church building itself reminds me a little of Trinity, Woking – before we removed the central pulpit! We learn that Richard candidated under John Nyota's guidance and was tutored by him in college; also that John and Faith were Richard and Jennifer's 'best couple' at their wedding. How many friendships arise from Christian contacts!

After the evening meal we are joined by **Rev Andy Moffoot** – a mission partner in Kenya – who tells us about his work and gives us a number of useful tips or ‘survival tactics’ for our stay. These days the Methodist Church waits for an invitation from a particular country, and *then* sends a minister, rather than the old-fashioned way of sending missionaries overseas based on a decision made in Britain. I thought Andy’s face looked familiar, and it turned out that, though he had been born in Zambia, he had candidated for the ministry in the U.K. and had appeared before my panel in the Connexional Candidates’ Examinations Committee in Manchester in 1993. We’d obviously given him a unanimous vote! Andy works ‘connexionally’, i.e. though he is based in Nairobi, he works across the whole of Kenya as ‘Youth and Junior Sunday School Coordinator’. I ask him whether he’s been happy in Kenya and he says a guarded “Yes, but...” There have been what he describes as “losses”, mainly in the form of relationships. Unlike normal circuit ministers, he has no church and therefore no ‘extended family’, as it were. He and his wife have also left friends back in the U.K. I reflect on the fact that for most folk who offer for the ministry, there is a cost. It’s different for each person, but there *is* a cost.

I share a room with Tony Loft. Without him it’s doubtful whether there would have been a trip. He has worked tirelessly to organise a hundred and one things to do with our visit – half of which are things that haven’t occurred to any of us but which *he* has thought of. He admits to being an occasional snorer and I say that, probably, I am as well. We’re both so tired that neither of us cares. We sleep like logs.

Wednesday 10th August

As I write this, we are now in the Meru district, staying at **Kibuline Secondary School**, a short distance from Baraimu, in two classrooms which have been converted into temporary dormitories. The beds are wooden bunks and we have been provided with brand new sheets and blankets. The mattresses are very thin, but after nearly eleven hours in the minibus, I don’t think we’ll have any trouble in sleeping.

Most of today has been spent travelling from Nairobi. An early shower, breakfast, and we are all on the road by 8.00 am – a little later than planned, but still with hopes of reaching Meru by early afternoon. A miscalculation results in us needing to use the Conference Centre’s small van as well as the minibus which has been hired. John Nyota travels in this, plus most of our luggage. Incidentally, we have brought a huge amount of stuff with us, a lot of which – items such as stationery, clothing etc. – will be left behind in Baraimu.

The journey is *very* long and *very* tiring. We were expecting to arrive at lunchtime, but clearly this is out of the question. Meru is probably just under 200 miles from Nairobi, and we have to make a number of stops – for fuel, ‘comfort breaks’ and food. The roads are pretty good out of Nairobi, and vastly superior to those in The Gambia, where one weaves constantly from side to side to avoid the huge craters and potholes, any one of which could break an axle. As we get nearer to the Meru district, however, progress becomes slower as the roads narrow and deteriorate in quality. The last 30 miles or so is very slow going, and sometimes we are barely above walking pace. However, it is a relief to find that everywhere is pretty dry and there is a complete absence of flooding. Hopefully this means that the weather will not seriously interfere with the work which we’ll doing – at least we’ll be able to walk from the school where we’ll be staying to the village.

One interesting side-effect of a tiring (and frustrating) day is that, perhaps not surprisingly, we are gelling as a group much more quickly than I had envisaged. We are quite a mixed bunch.

In the event, we reach the village at a quarter to seven in the evening, and the light is fading fast. We're amazed to find between 100 and 150 people there who greet us rapturously with singing and dancing. The children who sing to us look delighted that we're here, though many of them are very shy. It's quite clear that they've been waiting for us for a considerable time, and though we really needed to sort out our sleeping arrangements at the school before dark, we simply had to come straight to the village first. It's only about a quarter of an hour's drive from the school, anyway.

The minibus (which has been expertly driven by Stephen, who has taken really good care of us) performs one last duty and takes back to the school, where we bed down for the night. Tony Loft, who has been one of the chief architects of the project and has worked tirelessly over the past year to help organise this trip, is very keen that we should take adequate protection against mosquitoes. Hence we have all been issued with mosquito nets and have been urged to spray ourselves liberally with evil-smelling but effective repellent. There is lighting in each classroom but no mains electricity, so it will not be possible to re-charge appliances such as mobile phones and the laptop that I'm using to write this journal. We retire for the night, tired but thankful to be here, and excited at the prospect of making new friends tomorrow.

Incidentally, a word about Kenyan names. John and Faith are actually John *Kamau* Nyota and Faith *Mwari* Nyota. 'John' and 'Faith' are their baptised names and, as such, are really a relic of (Christian) colonialism. I now realise why one of Faith's email addresses was mwarinyota@hotmail.com. Faith has told me that Kimathi and Njeri have no other pre-name, and I'm glad about that. The Sacrament of Baptism is much more than about giving a child a name – particularly an English one! This also explains why, in Kenya, people are often addressed by their surname only. In Britain it would almost amount to rudeness – but not here.

Thursday 11th August

I wake at 5.30 am again to the sound of cock-crows, and enjoy a wonderful shower. I say 'shower', but it is actually a bucket of cold water on a chair, which I pour over my head. Everywhere is so dusty that even such a basic amenity as this is a real treat. Without dwelling on all the gory details, John points out that folk were working until past midnight yesterday to finish installing a loo for our benefit. The normal toilet facilities are (apart from a urinal for the men) two raised bricks for one to stand (or crouch) over a hole in the ground. It is a very *deep* hole, however!

Some of the girls have taken it upon themselves to cook and prepare meals for us, which is greatly appreciated. Breakfast is a simple affair – cereal, fruit juice, bread, jam or marmalade or honey, and tea or coffee. I rapidly discover that I cannot cope with Kenyan milk, which is just as well perhaps, since Kenyan tea is wonderful and adding milk probably detracts from the taste.

John has asked me (as unofficial chaplain) to lead morning devotions, and I feel moved to read part of the history of the Israelite conquest of Canaan – or, more precisely, Numbers xx, vs. xx-yy. This is the bit where Joshua sends a group to scout out the territory, and they come back with a double-edged report. They've encountered giants (the "sons of Anak") but have brought back a huge bunch of grapes from the valley of Eschol. The message for us is (I hope) clear: each of us faces his or her own 'giants' which, though not literal, are nonetheless very real. But whatever fears we have, they are more than outweighed by the blessings which God gives us – the grapes of Eschol. And that will be *our* experience, too. We sing a couple of hymns, too, and here Margaret (Sephton) shows her rare gifts as a musician. She can play anything, anywhere and (I'm willing to bet, though I don't, if you see what I mean) in any key, as well.

Before we make our way to the village we are met by the Principal of Kibuline Secondary School, **Mr James Kairi** who is accompanied by the Vice-principal, **Mrs Julia Ndegwa**. They tell us that, even though it's August and the summer holidays, the older students come in for extra tuition so as to be better prepared for their autumn examinations. This explains why, at 5.45 am, as I make my way to the 'shower' hut, there is a lesson going on and a classroom full of teenagers beavering away. I should have mentioned too, that last night at 10.00 pm, there was another class engaged in extra studies. They are all extremely well-behaved and seem to have excellent powers of concentration. But 5.45 am and 10.00 pm!! How I wish some of my Banbury School students had shown the same dedication all those years ago.

The road to the village is pretty rough but manageable. For this visit we have the coach, but when it leaves us we're on our own, as it were, apart from James Kairi's van, which he has kindly loaned to us for the next couple of days. At Baraimu there is a kind of second welcome. Various people speak, and I am called upon to say a few words. Faith translates as I speak – it's an interesting technique and one can't let oneself get carried away! You have to go at a steady pace, pausing after every sentence, so inevitably your speech (or sermon) is, in a sense, measured. Faith is very good at this, and John has me marvelling because he not only translates from English to Kimeru, but does it the other way around and at a speed which leaves me breathless. When I was asked to lead a day's seminar at a pre-Conference meeting of World Church representatives at Llandudno in 2003, everything I said was translated simultaneously into French and Spanish – so I'm used to this situation.

The children sing and dance for us again, with the same enthusiasm and joy that they did last night, but with perhaps a little more energy. Not surprising! However, I find it interesting that Njeri joins in quite spontaneously, even though she cannot speak very much Swahili. Later, when I think hard about exactly what happened I find that I cannot remember seeing anyone ask her to dance with the youngsters, or even Faith or John prompt her to do so. This was lovely.

At this point we meet a number of people who are heavily involved in the Toto Simba Project at the Wesley Empowerment Centre, together with the local councillor, **Joseph Ntongai**. The Chairman of the Toto Simba Project is a delightful man called **John Kobia**, and within a few minutes of talking to him I feel as if I've known him for years.

I am beginning to appreciate the nature of Kenyan dialects, which is quite different from, say, Yorkshire to Cockney. The nearest equivalent is Gaelic and its various strands. I have learned a few words in Swahili (though not nearly enough, and this is something I must attend to in the future) but the folk in Baraimu speak **Kimeru** – which is Faith's local dialect. John's family came originally from a little distance away, and his native dialect is **Kikuyu**. So when one realises that a lot of the people around here are (at least!) *tri-lingual*, i.e. fluent in Swahili, Kimeru and English, it makes you feel rather humble. John, being a linguist, is probably fluent in other dialects as well, but he does not flash around his academic achievements. Suffice it to say that Faith told me that he speaks Kimeru better than *her* – and it's *her* native dialect!

We all split up – some to spend time at the centre, others to stay with the youngsters, and most of us to walk to the homes of the villagers and familiarise ourselves with the locality. I go with Faith and the treasurer of the Wesley Empowerment Centre (**Albert**) **Pius Mutea**, who is such an interesting guide. First we go up the hillside a little and see the plot of land which has been bought (by the Rafiki Trust) to be the site of the new building. The Project has a number of different but interrelated parts, which includes the new school and community centre. At the moment, the children attend school in the local church. The plot of land actually has maize still growing on it, as

the owner – or should I say, the *previous* owner – hasn't been able to harvest it yet, as the weather has been colder than normal. Pius shows us how it has yet to fully ripen.

The three of us climb further up the hill and chat to the people who have the adjoining plot beyond. They have a cow, a heifer and some chickens, and their home is a clear indicator of real poverty and subsistence living. Faith tells me that the family will probably have less than an acre of land and their crops will compose mainly of maize and beans, with some bananas and other crops (such as coffee, tea and tobacco) to a lesser degree. Put in cash terms, their income probably doesn't exceed 5-6000 shillings, which is about £50 per annum. This family, together with each family we meet, are, without exception, pleased to see us and generous in their hospitality. So far, even though I have not encountered poverty of the kind I saw in West Africa, there is not doubt at all that these people are *very, very* poor.

As we walk along, I am introduced to the local produce, and find the range of tastes fascinating. First there is cassava, a root vegetable which I am offered and carry round with me like a club for the next hour or so, gnawing at it contentedly. Then there are the bananas (which are smaller and much sweeter than the ones we eat in Britain), arrowroot (which has a unique flavour that is not my favourite), paw-paws. The latter, Faith tells me, are extremely expensive in the UK. At the home of **Mrs Kanjira** (the Chairlady of the Women's Fellowship) we are given paw-paws and avocado, and water to wash our hands beforehand – which I find quite moving. This is something that rarely happens at home, perhaps because advances in hygiene make hand-washing before every meal unnecessary. If so, we have lost an important symbolic gesture of the kind we read about in the Bible – and it's a pity.

One other crop deserves mention: **miraa**, which comes from a small tree that grows on the slopes of the hillsides here. The young shoots are a mild narcotic and enjoyed by (some of) the locals, though it is discouraged in many places. I try some, but can't see what the fuss is about and Pius tells me that I would have to chew twenty or thirty stalks before I would experience the 'full effect', as it were. Nonetheless, it is exported from Kenya and, suitably processed, is a very popular (and expensive) commodity abroad – mainly in Asia.

From the Kanjiras we walk on further to visit John's parents, where we meet up with some of the other members of the group. We are offered lunch, but I am rather full already and can only manage some sweet corn. I try – in a very inadequate way – to express my sympathy to John's family for their recent loss. John's sister tragically died in childbirth a short time ago, and the baby failed to survive, either. What can you say? Typically, they bear their grief with faith and courage, and their support and care for each other are terrific.

In Kenya, village are quite different from those you find in the English countryside. In the latter they are compact affairs, whereas in Kenya, because of the size of the plots (or '**Shambas**'), the dwellings are much, much more scattered and spread out. So the Nyota family live a good mile or so from the church. Whilst we are at the Nyotas – who moved, incidentally, from outside Nairobi some ten years ago – we are introduced to Faith's cow, whose name is Mukiri, which means 'come quietly' (wonderful!). She was a present from John's parents when Faith and John were married.

I walk back to the centre of Baraimu with Pius and Faith. On the way we pass various people – all of whom wave and smile. At one point a little girl by side of the road gives us a shy smile and puts her hand over her mouth. Now, who taught her that? It was an instinctive, universal gesture, and gives me an idea for a sermon illustration on Saturday. It's simply that people are people, wherever they are, and though there are essentially superficial differences between us, God has made with far

more in common. I also find some aggregate (split stone) a little loose mortar, which gives me further ideas for Saturday.

When we get back, we take part in a celebration in the church. Actually, its proper title is **Kanisa Methodist Church** (Kanisa = 'God's House'), and the singing is led by the smallest children, the Women's Fellowship and the Baraimu church choir. Just a thought: I wonder whether the children become as self-conscious (of singing, that is) when they grow older as our own youngsters do? Almost inevitably there are more introductions and short speeches, but I really don't mind this. We are making new relationships, and this is what matters.

On this occasion I meet the minister of Kanisa Methodist Church for the first time. His name is **Rev Peter Maina Kariuki**, and he's also the superintendent of the Meru Circuit, which consists of 14 churches. The Banbury Circuit (Oxfordshire) where I spent twelve years, comprised 34 churches at one stage, but travelling from one end of the Circuit to the other was a very different matter! Although he has a bicycle, he can often only take one service on a Sunday because of the time involved in travelling. Tomorrow night many of us will be staying with families, rather than at the school, and I discover that Peter is to be my host.

I mentioned that a new toilet had been installed in the school. The villagers went one better and built a proper toilet block with a flushing lavatory and wash-hand basins for us, which was extremely kind and is another example of their courtesy and generosity. All this, of course, together with the sheets, blankets and so on, has all been entirely at their own expense.

Dinner is a simple affair of vegetables and pasta, which we eat in the church itself. We have two small heaters, so I am amazed at how the girls can feed nearly thirty of us and provide hot drinks all round. Since the bus has gone now and we won't see it until Sunday, most of us walk back to the school – some go in the Principal's van, which John drives. This, by the way, is a real 'banger' and has a leaking exhaust, which means that the occupants – whether sitting in the front or huddled in the back – are threatened with asphyxiation from petrol fumes. Those in the back have to be locked in (yes, really!) because the back doors won't shut properly. Since there is no other means of entrance or exit, as the side windows have bars and there is a solid partition between them and the driver, I dread to think what would happen if there was an accident and the van caught fire.

A group of us leave the church at about 6.30 pm, as we have been told that the walk back will take "only about 20 minutes or so". What wonderful optimism. In fact, it takes us a shade under an hour, and most of the walk is in complete darkness!

Friday 12th August

Another early start. I wake at 5.30-ish and by the time I've 'showered' it's dawn. Because we're so near the equator, there is very little twilight either in the morning or the evening, and the sun rises and sets with seemingly incredible rapidity. Also, the days are almost exactly 12 hours long, and this, of course, is true for whatever time of year it is. After breakfast I lead our brief devotions. Margaret plays 'Morning has broken' and 'Praise my soul' on the keyboard (which, incidentally, she's brought all the way from the UK and is going to leave at the church) and I read some words of Paul's to the Colossians (Ch. 3) which are very dear to me and speak of the 'naturalness' of Christian virtues. After prayers, John and Tony announce the plans for the day and we disperse.

The first part of my morning is spent writing up the journal, and whilst the others go off to the village, I stay behind for a while to catch up on the writing. I am, John Nyota reminds me, the

official 'scribe' as well as chaplain to the group. Whilst I am writing, the students from the school who have been doing extra studies for their examinations in the autumn, join me during their break. They are incredibly conscientious and have quite a different attitude to education than many British teenagers. Whilst nursery and primary school education is free in Kenya (but only fairly recently), they have to pay for the rest – so do not waste the opportunities given to them by the sacrifices made by their parents.

About fifteen of the teenagers crowd round, interested in my laptop and what I am writing. Many of them speak pretty good English, which makes them genuinely tri-lingual since they have Kimeru and Swahili as well, of course. We get on very well and soon they are laughing at my (attempted) jokes. They express great interest in the pictures of Joan and my family that I show them – particularly our 14 month-old grandson, Matthew. They are also fascinated by the fact that I was a teacher (mainly 14-19 year olds in Banbury, Oxfordshire) and ask me lots of questions. They all wear uniform, which is compulsory, and I am reminded of the day before yesterday when we encountered a lad of school age who told Faith that he was earning money doing odd jobs (such as carrying bags for visitors) so that he could purchase school uniform and therefore be able to attend classes again.

Whilst I am writing and waiting for John Nyota to pick me up and take me to the village, I keep an eye on Jennie, who has mild dysentery and is sleeping it off in her bunk. She is the first to be taken ill and I reflect on how fortunate we are. In The Gambia *all* of us were ill at one time or another, either from 'Banjul tummy' or dehydration or sun/heatstroke. And another thought. I have already made more friends than I did in two whole weeks in The Gambia – probably because our visit is so concentrated here, whereas in The Gambia we went to a number of villages, quite apart from three major towns. The two trips are quite different in many ways – each appropriate to its own special situation.

We don't have food in the church on this occasion (apart from lunch), since we shall be eating at our hosts' homes. **Stephen**, who is the Chairman of Baraimu Methodist Church – which means that he deputises for the minister whenever the latter is away – gives Peter Kariuki and I a lift to the manse in his rather swish SUV. Stephen is very wealthy, even by British standards, and is a good friend of the church. He and his wife **Edith** are a lovely couple.

The journey to the manse – which is quite a way from Baraimu – is broken by a stop at another village for meat and vegetables. It is quite dark by now, but there are crowds of people about. No street lights, of course, and just a succession of tin shacks lit dimly by oil lamps, candles and paraffin stoves. Peter orders some ribs (beef) from a butcher's shop and though it looks a huge quantity I feel I should pay. It's about 2 kilos and costs me 60/-, which is about 50 p. The butcher takes out a huge machete and, even though it's pitch black and he can only see by the feeble light of an oil lamp, chops up the meat with huge, sweeping blows that make short work of the bones. I am aghast, because the blade whistles down within an inch of his fingers.

In the event, Peter and I are dropped off at the manse. The next twelve hours are ones I shall never forget.

From the outside, the manse looks quite impressive. However, the main living-room is sparsely furnished, to say the least. There is a wooden table in the middle with two upright chairs; two rough wooden benches lining the walls; and that's it. Even though it's dark – there's no electricity and the only light comes from a single paraffin lamp and a small torch which Peter produces – I can see that the furnishings and fittings are at a very basic level. There are two bedrooms but only Peter's has a wardrobe and a small cupboard. There are no easy chairs or sofa and the kitchen is

just an alcove with a shelf and a stand-pipe. The bathroom is another (completely bare) room which is only identifiable as such because it has a hole in the floor to act as a drain. The toilet is a corrugated shack at the bottom of the garden and is not of the flushing variety.

I mention all this because it throws into sharp relief the situation at 97 Kingsmead Avenue, Worcester Park – which is a veritable palace by comparison. True, Peter has a home and is building a new house for his retirement, but this is 150 km away and he only sees his wife Regina one week in every three. So he lives alone in this manse which, he tells me, had been unoccupied for seven years before he took over as Super in 2003. I nod my head in sympathy, though not in comprehension. I cannot imagine what life and work must be like for him. Peter has five children – three girls and two boys. The oldest is twenty-one, and the school fees are a crippling burden. Peter's only other source of income is from a small **shamba** – basically two very small plots of land on which he grows maize.

We chat about church matters – which sounds boring but in fact we're both anxious to hear how each other lives and how our respective churches operate. The Methodist Church in Kenya has bishops who are *elected* for four years and are eligible for re-election only once. The presiding bishop serves for five years and the same rule applies. Peter talks about his candidature and training (he was tutored by John for a while) and I find it fascinating to compare notes. He produces a paper he wrote for his ordination on 'leadership', and I borrow it so that a copy can be made for me to take home. What makes it interesting – I can just about make out the words by the light of the paraffin lamp – is that he compares personality types to the animals you find in Kenya. I'm not sure I agree with his conclusions but it's certainly a novel approach.

Peter himself has an interesting background. He was not always a Methodist, having been a pastor in an independent evangelical church, before which he was – among other things – a boxer! Being the tactful person I am, I ask him what weight he fought at – he is short and rather stout now. He says "featherweight", and I am glad the light is so dim that he cannot see the contorted expression on my face as I try not to snigger. He admits to having "put on a little weight since entering the ministry", which is the mother of all understatements. Still, I can sympathise!

By now (approaching 10.00 pm) the charcoal fire is hot enough and we're ready to cook supper. We're going to have beef stew, made from the ribs, a chopped cabbage, and onion. Whilst Peter is 'showering', I tend the pot but feel too inexperienced to make the **ugali**. (In Kimeru the word is '**nkali**') This is a loaf made from **jogoo** – maize flour and Peter makes in double quick time. By 11.15 pm we're ready to eat. This is not a moment too soon for me, since I've been up since 5.30 am. I'm not too keen on the maize bread but have two or three pieces to go with my stew. Peter kindly leaves the meaty bits for me and piles the fatty, grisly chunks on his own plate, together with the bones. He eats an enormous supper (including most of the bones) and expresses surprise at my small appetite. I am telling the truth, here. "We EAT in Kenya!", he announces, but I suspect that this is the first proper meal he's had today. And, by the way, there is no breakfast – only cups of tea.

One fascinating thing and a curious feature of our time together is the number of occasions that Peter's mobile phone rings. "Auld Lang Syne" starts up at least six or seven times and Peter says that this is quite normal. I venture that the mobile must have transformed the pattern of his ministry and he readily agrees. A friendly member in the nearby village charges it up for him.

We carry on chatting until nearly one o'clock and – despite the fact that I'm desperately keen to find out more about Peter's life and work – my stamina finally gives out and I tell him that I've got to sleep. He rigs up a mosquito net specially for me, I collapse on the bed and am asleep instantly.

About 3.00 am I have to pay a visit to the little boys' room thirty yards down the garden, and on my way back find Peter outside the back door with his torch and wearing a concerned look. Apparently elephants sometimes pass this way in the night and (being the African kind, rather than the docile Indian variety) have been known to attack people. I kid you not. We are, after all, deep in the country. This gives me another idea for a sermon illustration – revolving around elephants, not toilets, that is. So I say “**lala salama**” (which I have been taught is Kimeru for “Goodnight”), go back to bed, and dream of elephants.

Saturday 13th August

As I've mentioned, there is no breakfast as such – perhaps Peter is still full from last night – but he makes excellent tea. The tea itself – without milk, for I really can't take it – is delicious. Whatever else I bring home, I really must take back some tea. I shower, using the hot water he kindly provides, and it's bliss. He talks to various folk on the mobile and tells me that we'll be picked up by Stephen. Whilst we're waiting, we continue the previous night's conversation.

In Kenya, Methodist ministers are paid monthly, not quarterly as they are in Britain. However, I am appalled to discover that Peter hasn't been paid for *three months*. I ask him how he manages, and he replies, “By the grace of God”. He has an interesting role here, in that he clearly sees his ministry in terms of representing the people – literally. So, for example, when it comes to (the current) question of land registration, Peter is, as he himself puts it, “the voice of the voiceless”. I reflect that when we were preparing for ordination all those years ago (in 1984, to be precise) and talked glibly and in abstract terms about having a ‘representative role’ as ministers, we never imagined it in quite the terms that I am hearing from this Kenyan Methodist minister.

When Stephen arrives to pick us up, we hear that Simon has been taken ill – and though he's been given a check-over in the hospital at Meru, it's not serious. It transpires that he has had a tummy bug and was moved from his host's house to Stephen and Edith's home to be more comfortable. Because he's the youngest member of the party we feel especially solicitous, but there's no need to worry. He stays behind today but is fine.

We rendezvous with the coach and I am delighted (and a little amazed) that everyone's been picked up without incident – they have been scattered over quite a wide area over the previous twelve hours or so – and that we're all present and correct. On the coach we swap experiences. About fifteen of us have received local hospitality: all the sleeping arrangements have been pretty basic by British standards, and each has found the welcome and kindness that he or she has received overwhelming. They are so poor, yet so generous.

This morning we drive to **Maua**, to the hospital where Faith was chaplain. On the way we cover some really hilly country – we're actually about 6000 ft above sea-level anyway – and whilst the coach inches its way painfully up the incline, we take the opportunity to admire (and photograph) the plains below us. Kenya is an extraordinarily beautiful country.

As ever we are taking photographs. Robert has an impressive digi-camcorder that seems incredibly versatile (it takes stills as well as movies) – there should be plenty of material to use for publicity when we return. In fact, I have been carrying round *two* cameras: my digi-cam (which is over 4 years old now and not like the ultra-compact models that everyone seems to have these days), and also an ancient Topcon SLR. I bought the latter 2nd hand in 1981 when I left teaching and it was seven or eight years old then – so now it's a real relic, and a heavy relic at that. I am using the Topcon to take slides, but the led exposure meter has packed up and for the last few days I've

simply been guessing. The slides are to enable us to have an alternative form of illustration when we get back home and start giving talks etc. to publicise the Toto Simba Project. We'll have PowerPoint, of course, but not everyone is comfortable with this medium and the slides might come in useful – provided one can see anything! I've pointed out to lots of people at Baraimu that the whole point of taking the photographs is to give us 'ammunition' for future advocacy. In other words, when we ask people for money for this (and future) projects, and they respond, "What's it all about?" – we can tell them.

On the way to Maua Hospital we pass John's first 'post' at **Kianjai** before he became the superintendent of a circuit in Nairobi. This is where Kimathi was born (in Maua Hospital, of course) and I reflect on the fact that neither Kimathi nor Njeri can speak Swahili, let alone a local dialect like Kimeru (Faith's) or Kikuyu (John's). I only found this out by chance a few months ago during a conversation with Faith, and its significance was almost completely lost on me, even though I knew that Njeri had actually been born in Manchester. So we have a curious anomaly: seeing Njeri and Kimathi mixing with the children of Baraimu but not really being able to converse with them. Faith tells me that they've started lessons in Swahili, but it makes me realise how vitally important it is for the Nyotas to have their three month furlough [leave of absence which all World Church partners have to return to their own country in the middle of their five year term of appointment] in the summer of 2006 – for John and Faith to have a real break, but also for Kimathi and Njeri not to lose touch with their roots.

The visit to the hospital at Maua is fairly uneventful – but perhaps that's just me, having spent so much of my own time in various hospitals during the past eighteen months. The wards are poorer, but basically very similar, and there are the same rows of patients and would-be patients sitting outside consulting rooms – most with the same blank expressions on their faces – as in Britain. There are also the same posters on the walls of the corridors, but here the emphasis is upon AIDS and the early symptoms of TB.

One upsetting incident concerns a five year-old child in one of the villages with suspected malaria. Martin (Alexander), to whose attention this has been drawn, suggests that some of us might donate the odd malaria tablet, which might help the child. We ask a consultant (through Faith), who has misgivings about this but writes some suggestions for medication on a slip of paper.

On the way out of the hospital, Faith is suddenly accosted by three nurses who remember her. Since she left about six years ago, this was both lovely and moving. Faith was clearly very popular as well as efficient – two characteristics of her ministry in the Wimbledon Circuit, where she is loved *and* respected – as is John, of course.

We arrive back at Baraimu at about 3.30 pm, after an unsuccessful attempt to have a quick look around a tea-processing plant (no pun intended). The visit was pre-booked by John, but there is a new manager who knows nothing about the arrangement and says "No". A pity: Kenya is, after all, the world's 3rd largest exporter of tea, and very good it is, too. Our later arrival (the service was due to start at 3.00 pm) doesn't seem to bother anyone, and we engage in informal conversation with the local villagers, whose numbers are swelling by the minute. By now it has become almost automatic to greet people with the word "**Muga**" (the reply is "**Muga sana**") which is Kimeru for "How are you?". We have already got used to saying "**Jambo**", which is the Swahili equivalent. When addressing a group, we learn to say "**Muge ni**".

When the service starts (at about 5.00 pm), led by Rev Peter Kariuki, I estimate the congregation to be in the region of 500 men, women and children. We are in the open, of course, and it is a beautiful, balmy evening. I have been asked to preach, and offer some thoughts on I Peter 2:5-7

(‘living stones’), using as my main visual aid a stone block which is conveniently located within ten feet of where I am standing. I do not use the microphone, as I’ve been barely able to understand what has been said so far by those who’ve used it. Faith translates once more, and does so with accuracy and energy.

Basically, I say that we’re doing more than providing money for a new building (the Wesley Empowerment Centre). We’re building relationships and through the friendships that will form between us, we shall be bonded together to form what Peter calls a ‘spiritual temple’. But the stones about which Peter writes are not like bricks – all pretty well identical. Rather they’re like the stone that I’m holding in my hand, and I use the analogy of the dry stone walls that you see in the British countryside. I actually refer to the stone walls in Wales – which is probably a mistake, as it’s difficult for Faith to explain what I mean. Anyhow, I hope the message is clear – each of us, though different, has a place and a role to fulfil, and I finish by saying that the other sense of the word used by Peter for stone (‘lithos’) is *precious* stone – because we are all of inestimable value in the sight of God, who is the Father of us all. It seems to be well-received, and I end with the words, **‘Bwana Yesu Asifiwe’**, which is Kimeru for “Praise the Lord!”.

Peter then leads a short Communion service (in Kimeru) but to my surprise (and, I confess, relief) only about 100 or so communicate. If everyone had come, the service would have been much, much longer. I also confess that the liturgy itself seems ancient and uninspiring, and is delivered by Peter in a monosyllabic drone. Even though I have a copy of the actual words and know roughly the meaning of what’s being said, I can’t shake off a feeling of tedium – and wonder whether any of the onlookers feel as I do. I help distribute the wine, and find it a deeply moving experience. The service draws to a close with members of *our* group singing to *them*, such songs as ‘Shine, Jesus, shine’ and ‘We’re marching in the light of God’ (in different languages). During the latter – to everyone’s great amusement – we form a conga, and encourage them to join, which provokes even greater laughter. Soon there are over 100 of us, snaking our way round the clearing, and everyone’s smiling and laughing. Such English reserve!

The final part of the service consists of the stone-laying. I have been asked to join two others and dig a small hole in the plot of land that we have purchased and lay a (symbolic) foundation stone to mark the official beginning of the project. It’s so dark by now, however, that I can’t actually see who the other two men are, I *think* they are Stephen (as Chairman of Baraimu Methodist Church) and John Kobia (as Chairman of the Toto Simba Project). I wonder whether it should really be John Nyota who should take the spade and do the honours, as he’s done more than anyone to expedite the project, and really given of himself to see it reach this stage. However, I suppose that it doesn’t really matter. What *is* important is that we’ve made a start and everything’s now on a proper, legal footing. It’s yet another very moving occasion.

We adjourn for food – European and African, cooked on the spot – and finally the guest of honour, the Assistant Minister of Education, **Dr Kilemi Mwiria**, appears. His vehicle suffered a puncture, which has lengthened his journey by two hours. Everybody defers to him, and he really is good value. It’s quite dark by now, but the speeches are made with the help of the headlights of various vehicles which have been strategically positioned at the edge of the clearing. Whereas a few days ago in Nairobi, his words of welcome came across as some what routine, this time he delivers the goods and shows why he was elected (in 2002) by such an overwhelming majority. He’s the local M.P., you see, as well as being a government minister. In the election, he won 149 of the 150 votes cast at the local polling station, which, co-incidentally, happened to be at Baraimu. Even the opposition agents voted for him, and when the villagers are reminded of this by our hosts, there is much laughter. He emphasises something which has already occurred to us and which will be a

potential area for development in the future: sponsorship of youngsters through secondary education.

It is a fantastic evening, and one which will stay in my memory for the rest of my life – the service, the speeches, the cheering, the singing and dancing, and the sharing of food together. John (Nyota) holds it all together with a charisma that belongs only to him. He has worked immensely hard and has coped graciously with lots of extra, unexpected tasks and unforeseen situations. He will thoroughly deserve his rest in Mombasa next week. I need a break, too.

A postscript to the day is provided by a bizarre little incident at Kibuline School. The men's sleeping quarters are locked! Robert climbs in through a window and passes out my lap-top, which needs re-charging. This can only be done at certain hours of the night in the administration block where there is a single 13 amp socket, whilst the generator is running. There is no other source of electricity at the school.

Taking care to avoid the bats – which are more numerous tonight, for some reason – we finally locate a key to the door of the classroom and make our way, exhausted, to bed.

Sunday 14th August

I ring Joan to wish her a happy birthday, and feel thankful that at least I'll be back on our (36th) wedding anniversary on Tuesday the 23rd. We've spoken a few times on the mobile (extraordinary, nearly 6000 miles away and able to keep in such close contact!), and I feel a little guilty that I've been asking the latest score in the test match between England and Australia at Manchester – but not *that* guilty! Only John Sattaur and Joyce Plant are really cricket enthusiasts, as far as I can tell. We have become a much more cohesive group now – a pity we are leaving this morning!

On this occasion we have breakfast at the school but go straight to the village for our last service and the farewells. Before we leave, however, the students and some of the staff of Kibuline Secondary School gather round. James and Julia say their own goodbyes to us, and the head boy and head girl of the school each make a short speech, which we find very moving.

In the church we hold a short service, and even though it's really for *us*, several villagers come and sit with us. We sing and pray and I offer some thoughts on Matthew 7 (building a house on rock) and share a lovely story which was passed on to me by my younger son Paul, who is himself a Local Preacher. This – in a very condensed form – is about a man whose neighbour has a huge block of stone in his garden. He watches him start to chip away at it, then comes back after a couple of week's holiday to find the mass of stone has been transformed into a beautiful sculpture of an elephant. He asks his neighbour how he has managed to create something so accurate as well as beautiful, and his neighbour replies, "I just cut away and removed everything that didn't look like an elephant!" – which, I believe, is a lovely illustration of how we can *really* build on rock and become more Christ-like as individuals. It's a super story – it occurred to me after the toilet incident at Peter's – for which I take no credit, but good sermon illustrations are often like that.

Even though we've said our official goodbyes already, there are more farewells this morning. All kinds of people have turned up to thank us (for what? We feel so inadequate) and wish us well and a safe journey home. Perhaps the most touching are the words of John Kobia, who says how sorry he has been that he wasn't able to offer any of us hospitality in his own home. As a gesture of thanks and friendship he gives John, Tony and I bananas (to share around) from his shamba, and also a bag of bean seeds. We hug.

All too quickly we find ourselves in the bus again and bouncing down the track leaving Baraimu in the distance. Most of us wish we could have stayed longer. On our way to Nairobi we make four stops.

The first is a brief visit to Kenya Methodist University (or 'KEMU' as it is called, for short). Where John lectured and where Faith trained for the ordained ministry – and where, of course, they met!

The next stop is also a short one – this time in Meru itself, where John has some business to attend to. As we queue up at a loo, we're approached by various characters, asking us for money. This is a phenomenon that seems hardly to exist in the countryside, but one has to be *very* careful in the towns, and *never* (if you're a European) walk around the streets alone, especially at night. Because Meru isn't 'touristy' the folk lack the sophistication of those people, for example in The Gambia, who would sidle up to you, listening in on conversations and join in, asking to be your guide or whatever, and then demanding money, accusing you of being racist and hating their country if you refused. It can be very difficult. There are two children who are begging and who really should be in school. John does the 'recommended thing' (for ministers, that is, when we're approached for money) and takes them across the street to a café and buys them both a drink. Good on you, John.

Off we go again, and our next stop is at the Equator. It's marked with a sign on the main road on which we're travelling, and it's quite a strange experience watching a guy demonstrating the 'Coriolis effect'. This is where the water runs down into a plug-hole in a clockwise in the northern hemisphere, but *anti-clockwise* in the southern. [Writing this, I've forgotten, and Tony and I have just checked by using a small stick in the wash-hand basin] The man in question uses two sticks in a water receptacle to show us. On the Equator itself, the water behaves differently and the sticks, which we have seen rotate different ways 20 meters north and 20 meters south of 'the line', stay still and eventually go *sideways* to the edges of the bowl. The water, as it drains away, goes *straight* down without any twist. One lives and learns.

There are also a succession of stalls and small shops on this point. We disperse and do some shopping, but this time it's with a difference, because (as elsewhere in Africa except in the 'posh' shops in the towns, which have fixed prices) you are *expected* to haggle. I have done this before and find it great fun, except that I laugh so much that I really do hope I'm not appearing to be rude. Here, the traders have an interesting technique which I've not encountered before. They won't actually *say* the price of any article. Rather, they take you to the back of the shop and write it down on a piece of paper and then invite you to write down *your* bid. The process continues until a price is agreed; you shake hands and the deal is done. I realise – of course! – that they won't say a price out loud because the traders either side (who are selling virtually identical merchandise) are obviously listening hard. I buy a tablecloth for Joan and a small zebra for Matthew, my grandson. Since he's only 14 months old and almost everything finds its way into his mouth at some stage, I feel that an animal with horns or tusks – even though more exciting to play with – would be a bad idea.

Our next stop – and final one, though we don't know it, yet – is for a late (*very* late) lunch at the Trout Tree Restaurant. We're still in the Meru district, and not that far from Mt Kenya, by the way. The restaurant is spectacular and, since this is the first meal we've had for a week that even vaguely corresponds to what we normally eat at home, it's bit of a shock to the system. It's not that it's expensive (it isn't) but when you been eating simply food alongside very poor people, having a glass of wine with your food feels a little strange. Most of us have the standard house fare which, not surprisingly, is trout. This is prepared and served in about twenty different ways and there's trout pate, trout mousse and fish soup to choose as starters. Part of me wonders whether we'll be

offered trout ice-cream, or the waiter will come back with the words “Trout’s off”, a la Basil Fawlty.

On a serious note, however, our happy, relaxed mood is suddenly shattered when Jennie (Barford) discovers to her horror that her bag has been stolen from beside her chair. It contains numerous items which to lose are upsetting, e.g. money, credit card, toiletries, items of sentimental value. But the real blow is that Jennie’s passport and airlines tickets (and Glenda Sharman’s tickets too, which Jennie has been minding) are among the items stolen. Everyone surrounds her with words of sympathy and encouragement but few can really understand what she’s feeling. She’s incredible, actually. After the initial shock she bears up and we work out a of action to deal with the problem.

We decide to drive straight to Nairobi and not stop in Nakuri as we’d originally planned. Maybe this is just as well as we have to check in at Mombasa airport by noon. Again, the distance we have to cover (in terms of time and nervous energy expended) is huge. We’re talking about a six hour journey from the restaurant, and that’s over and above the four or five hours we’ve already spent in the coach. Some of the seats are very cramped; the roads are of mixed quality so the ride is a rough one. The bus journeys we have experienced are *not* for the faint-hearted or those who are easily upset and suffer from travel-sickness.

After what seems an eternity we arrive in the outskirts of Nairobi (it really is a huge city) and – incredible as it may seem – are able to have a *cooked* supper at the Methodist Guest House and Conference Centre. Not only have they been able to put us *all* up (some three to a room, admittedly) at virtually no notice at all, but they have taken the trouble to provide food for us at 11.30 pm on our arrival. Fantastic.

Monday 15th August

Most of the morning (for me) is taken up helping to sort out Jennie's passport and ticket problems. Whereas the others can have a little lie in (which they deserve!), Tony and I set our alarms for 5.30 am as we need to be at the British High Commission very early, and the traffic in Nairobi on a Monday morning has got to be seen to be believed. When we reach the office, we tell the taxi-driver to wait and he smiles and readily agrees. Perhaps this is because we haven’t paid him yet. Tony reminds us of the old axiom: *do not pay until the service has been provided!* Wise words indeed.

The staff there are courteous, sympathetic, efficient *and* quick, and the official tells Jennie and I that a new passport will be forwarded to Mombasa by Friday. Wonderful! Jennie looks hugely relieved. She has borne the stress of this traumatic episode quite superbly. We drive straight to the airport and spend a few hours with Kenya Airlines trying to get replacement tickets for Jennie and Glenda. There will be a £45 ‘surcharge’ for each, which should be recoverable on Jennie’s travel insurance, but we have to pay for two single tickets to Mombasa – which is odd, since the flight is, in theory, fully booked already, and unfair, since the tickets have been paid for (in advance) already. Ho hum!

However, we are all re-united and, much relieved that a compromise solution of sorts has been reached, gather in the departure lounge. Jennie’s resilience has been extraordinary. The plane leaves at 1.30 pm, and it’s a short and very pleasant flight from Nairobi to Mombasa....

Tuesday 16th – Saturday 20th August (Mombasa)

This is the week we spend in Mombasa. For most of the group it's a holiday: a sort of 'bonus' after the work of last week. Because our activities here are not really related to the Toto Simba Project, I have decided not to keep a formal journal as such. Instead, I have simply noted some 'post-Baraimu' impressions from the conversations I've had here with the group members.

- Most of us wish we had been able to spend more time in Baraimu. However, everyone I've talked to agrees that we did about as much as we could possibly do in the four days that we had, i.e. introduce ourselves, get to know at least some of the people who lived in the village, become better educated ourselves and a little more aware of the issues and challenges which we are hoping to meet in the coming years.
- Some (though not all) of the party have felt the contrast between our former surroundings and the hotel in which we're now staying in Mombasa has been almost too much to bear, and have struggled to come to terms with its relative luxury, even though it's costing us only about £22,00 a night, half board. I say to one of the party that, when we returned from The Gambia, we felt *exactly* the same in our own homes. Whatever guilt we feel at the moment will be there, no matter whether we decided to fly straight home or come to Mombasa. I really believe it wouldn't have mattered. Also, we've probably needed the week here, though in the future we should perhaps engage in a little more formal debriefing.
- Some of the group are wondering whether a return trip in 2006 might be feasible, i.e. a lot of the present party want to come back, and there is a finite number that can form a viable group. I suppose that this is dictated (in part, at any rate) by the size of the bus. A group of fifty would be *far* too large, and the logistics almost impossible. So perhaps, if we are thinking in terms of a larger proportion of young people coming in 2007, the only way to enable all to come who want to, would be to have an extra trip. We'll have to see.
- Tony and I have a very interesting (and quite long) conversation with Eli, Catherine, Hannah and Simon one night over dinner and afterwards, which ranges far and wide and covers a fair amount of theological and ethical ground. I find it immensely stimulating and only regret that I wasn't able to get to know them better, earlier.
- The next trip which is organised must pay more attention to 'bonding', to use an awful modern cliché (has overtones of superglue). Far too many of the group did not seem to know others in the party and one member joined *very* late in the day. I would personally put a cut-off point at least six months before any future trip and would suggest that this be when the plane tickets are bought.
- One little thing, which relates to the kind of things we'll be doing on our return to the 'old country'. Rob has suggested using some of the photographs to make a calendar, copies of which we can sell to raise money for the project. Part of me wants to applaud an excellent idea; part of me is horrified at the thought, as I know the kind of photographs Rob takes, given his mischievous sense of humour! For example, he has a motion-sequence of me diving which is, frankly, grotesque. I think I'd just said, "On land a hippo, in the water, a dolphin!", before executing what I imagined to be a respectable dive. The reality is very different. Seriously, it's a good idea and Rob's got the expertise and commitment to make it a success.
- Looking at the entries people have made in a kind of journal/scrapbook which will be sent to Baraimu, what comes across very clearly is that the members of our group who stayed in homes, valued the experience greatly. This was one major difference with the trip to The Gambia, where we really did not get to *know* the local people to any great extent. Even though our stay in the Meru district was all too brief, the personal contacts made lasting impressions on all concerned.

Sunday 21st August

I've made this a separate entry because it's our last full day together and some important things have happened. This morning most of us go to church. The choice is between a traditional Methodist service in a church which is some distance away, a service (later in the morning) which would have been completely in Swahili, and an earlier one at a place quite close by. This is the one we choose, despite the fact that it isn't Methodist (not that this matters to us) and is a special evangelical rally. John Nyota tells us that there will be lots of singing and probably two thousand or more in the congregation. He's not wrong.

We arrive about 10.00 am via minibus (the ubiquitous Toyota van) and even though worship has apparently been in progress for half an hour, it doesn't seem to matter – in fact people keep coming in throughout the service. It's not a church as such, by the way, but a vast marquee of the kind you used to see in old circuses. It really can hold the colossal numbers that John has spoken about. There is a big stage (big enough to hold several hundred people if necessary) and a massive sound system. The service is also being televised, but whether it's live or will be broadcast at a later date, we're not sure. There are ushers, but no one welcomes us, even though we're obviously not locals, and there's no explanation or guide as to what will happen. The music is so loud that we can hear singing from some distance away, so it probably wouldn't have done any good for one of the stewards to speak to us, unless it was in sign language.

The noise is deafening. I know it's been a while since I've been to a concert or even a gig, but this is the loudest noise I've ever heard in my life, I think. There is a music group and a large gospel choir led by a white woman who has a superb, rich contralto voice but who screams into the microphone so that I can hardly make any words out (apart from 'Jesus') – even though they are repeated again and again and again.... and again. She leads the assembly – which I guess at 2500-3000 in number – in three songs, and this takes up three quarters of an hour. I have to sit down and spend part of the time holding my ears, wondering whether I can hold out until someone *talks* to us or prays, or preaches. Eventually, after a junior choir sings and dances (the volume is turned down for them), the pastor emerges.

John (by whom I'm sitting) manages above the noise to tell me that the pastor used to be a Methodist Local Preacher but 'couldn't take it anymore and moved on'. He is greeted with rapturous cheers and John shouts in my ear that, 'to them, he is a god'. 'Really', I think, and start to feel a little apprehensive. I am trying very hard not to make instant judgments but when he starts to preach from Matthew 28 and Mark 16 I find myself becoming very critical. I suppose it's inevitable that preachers and ministers should be both extra-appreciative and also super-critical of others, but I really do feel he's missed a trick. He ignores what Matthew says about the disciples worshipping the Risen Lord '*though some doubted*', and preaches a message of absolute certainty which, I have to say, is not shared by an awful lot of folk that I know. It's not shared by the gospel writer, either!

The notion of faith necessarily encompasses an element of doubt, in my humble opinion. However, as the preacher warms to his task, his voice rises in both volume and pitch till he is shouting (and repeating) every phrase into the microphone. His jacket comes off, too. Now it's true that some of the points he makes have me nodding in agreement. But when he starts saying, "You may have heard some of us speaking in tongues earlier; this is because we have the Holy Ghost working in us and it's a mark of the power of God...." and so on, I have to interject. Despite the fact that I am basically a shy, retiring sort of chap, I find myself calling out, "I Corinthians 14! **I Corinthians 14!** **I CORINTHIANS 14 !!!!**" John Nyota smiles and says to me, "A touch of eisegesis as well as

exegesis!" In other words, our preacher friend was making Scripture say what *he* wanted to say, not what the writers were saying.

One of the group has already left; several of the party are by the entrance as it's getting very hot indeed. We wait for a minibus – about three-quarters of an hour and there's no shade – and I try to put my reactions to the service in some sort of order. They are, briefly as follows:

- Huge enthusiasm, sense of joy on the part of all who were engaged.
- The energy of the singers and the liveliness of the worship.
- Narrow theologically, as I expected!
- Overall sense of feeling an 'outsider': no attempt to help me feel a genuine part of what was going on.
- The fifty-odd 'disciples' who'd been sent out and asked at the service to stand, alongside those who they had helped come to faith was very moving.
- The overall 'ethos' of the worship was very American, and you could switch on to any one of the American gospel channels on Sky TV and see something almost identical. A real pity. Where can one find worship that is neither flat and tasteless as I suspect their traditional Methodist worship is, nor of the OTT American variety as this is – but something that is *distinctively* and *authentically* Kenyan? Next visit, hopefully.

Monday 22nd August

Our flight to Mombasa leaves at 8.00 pm, and the coach is due to take us to the airport at about 4.30 pm, which gives us some time to do last-minute shopping, have a swim or (in my case) finish writing up this journal. The journey home – including 2½ hours queuing at Mombasa, 3 hours in a transit lounge in Nairobi, and delays of other kinds in the flight itself – amounts to about 18 or so hours, 'door to door'. With a night's sleep missed, it takes a while to recover!

Now that we're home, what can one say?

Those who've never been to Africa before or who have not seen real poverty 'close-up', as it were, have been deeply affected. In terms of practical work we achieved far less than the group that went to The Gambia five years ago. However, in terms of raising (our) awareness, making friends and putting the whole project – in *all* its aspects – on a real *personal* footing, I feel the trip was hugely worthwhile. Speaking for myself, as one who had grave doubts about taking two weeks out of circuit work to go, I wouldn't have missed the experience for the world.

Postscript

Having re-read this journal since our arrival back in the U.K., I have decided to produce two versions – one with photographs and one with text only. The latter will be more manageable, particularly in emailing to folk who haven't got Broadband. Hopefully, they will be of some value to those who wish to support the venture financially or simply with their prayers, and will not lessen the desire of others to visit the project personally in 2007 or in years to come.

Barrie Tabraham
September 2005

Members of the Party

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Nicholas Borrett
Dawn Downes
Betty Langmaid
Tony Loft
Robert King
Margaret McCarthy
Ann Miller
Margaret Payne
Joyce Plant
John Sattaur
Margaret Sephton
Glenda Sharman
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