On arrival as a first-time visitor to Africa, you wonder if your expectations are going to be fulfilled. Unbroken sunshine, wide open spaces, majestic beasts roaming free? What we got on arrival at Entebbe early on Saturday didn’t quite match up: pouring rain, mosquitos buzzing under the tin roof of the car-park shelter, and hours of traffic jams on the road from the airport to Masaka. Finally, we got to our destination after nearly five-and-a half hours in the car from Entebbe, a trip that should have taken about two-and-a-half. So we were pretty jaded on arrival in Masaka, but a lovely meal cooked by Erioth (pastor Immanuel’s wife) helped to revive us on Saturday tea-time.

Ostensibly, the main reason for our trip to Uganda was to teach two School of Ministries modules, ‘Christian Foundations’ (Tim and myself) and ‘Growing in Christ’ (Brenda). A total of 43 students attended the sessions which were held from Monday through Friday in a church on the outskirts of Masaka, though not all of the students were able to attend full-time. The teaching was well received, and many students thanked us warmly for being there and for delivering the material. But we also thanked them for listening. The students - mostly pastoral workers of varying ages and backgrounds – were giving up as much as four weeks of their leave from work or study to attend a range of School of Ministries modules during May. These folks are really hungry to get hold of God’s truth and to apply it in their local settings. It’s pleasing to report that all the students passed their final examination at the end of the week, barring a couple whose papers needed a little re-work (remember that English is a second language for the majority).

In reality, the more important reason for our visit was to build on our connections with the people there, both the students and also the congregation at Pastor Immanuel’s church. Tim said at one point: ‘Even if we didn’t teach or preach at all, the Holy Spirit would be working in our hearts and theirs, knitting us together.’ That said, Immanuel made sure he ‘put us to work’ in terms of sharing, praying and generally ministering to folk at every opportunity. Tim and Brenda both preached in the Sunday morning service, and all three of us had slots to share in their evening meetings during the week. We found God placed things on our hearts to share, some of which we didn’t have until we were in Uganda. Friday evening’s meeting culminated in a time of ‘impartation’ where we were privileged to pray for many of the congregation to see God move them into more of their inheritance in Him.

In Immanuel’s church there are several young men who are really on fire for God and have the potential to be leaders in their own right in the coming years; Immanuel calls them his ‘boys’. To pick just one of the ‘boys’ as an example: Leonard is a guy in his early 20s who works as a nurse in the Masaka hospital but has embarked on a course of study which will lead to qualification as a doctor in the future. Leonard served us very ably as a translator for the School of Ministries sessions, while concurrently working night shifts at the hospital. As if that were not enough, he is also caring for younger siblings due to family circumstances which are not of his making. In all of this, Leonard shows a genuine zeal and hunger for God, while also having a twinkle in his eye and an appetite for fun and games. Who knows how much God might accomplish through Leonard in the years and decades to come? The value of sowing into a life like Leonard’s just can’t be calculated; that’s what trips of this kind are all about.

Uganda is just different from the things we’re used to in the UK. It’s not only the mud roads with their deep ruts, or the hawkers selling fish by the road, or the frequent power cuts, or the fried grasshoppers they sell like popcorn. It’s the pastor, a student in the School of Ministries, whose ‘patch’ is a group of 50 islands on Lake Victoria, and who gets around to visit his flock by boat. Or the local politician whom we met, who has received death threats for refusing to kow-tow to corruption. Or, sadly, the student who had to leave before the School of Ministries was finished, because of the death of his child (we think due to Malaria). These are people who live much closer to life and death issues on a daily basis than we’re accustomed to.

After another marathon car journey we had the privilege of relaxing at the Lake Victoria hotel in Entebbe for a few hours before flying back to Heathrow via Amsterdam. It’s great to be back in the UK, but our thoughts are very much still with the brothers and sisters whose lives we touched (and who touched ours) in Uganda. We look forward to building our connection with them still further in the future.

John Mc