

Uganda Regional Conference Trip June/July 2019

This was the second time Peter and I travelled to the western region of the country to teach at 2 two-day conferences for members of the Full Gospel Church (FGC) network which Immanuel serves.

We flew out of Heathrow on an overnight flight surrounded by students from a C of E secondary school on the way to Malawi to visit fellow 6th formers (year 12 and 13) in a twinned school. I had a good conversation with one of the members of staff who was sat next to me.

Fred met us as Immanuel was unwell. Journey time to Nyendo was cut to 3 and half hours thanks to a new stretch of motorway between Entebbe and Kampala, though Peter and I didn't see much of it! Fred, Irene and their children are doing well. Irene works voluntarily for a hardware shop at present to gain experience with the aim of opening a shop of their own in due course. She also works 2 days a month as chairperson of the local council in Masaka. Fred is taking increasing responsibility within the FGC network and oversees 11 congregations. He has also been asked to oversee two other congregations which are not part of FGC.

We were staying at a different hotel this time and met Immanuel for lunch and after settling in spent the evening with him and Erioth in their home catching up with news about family members including their growing number of grandchildren.

Sunday morning saw us at Nyendo FGC where we were welcomed warmly. It was great to see many familiar faces, and new ones too, though Erioth commented that they have a number of 'tourist' Christians who come and then go! Mark preached on forgiveness and many said they were impacted by the message.

The plan had been to move on and reach Ibanda by nightfall but Immanuel's car broke down a couple of miles outside Masaka and we had to limp back to see if our hotel had rooms for the night, which they did.

A planned early start the next morning was delayed because Immanuel's car required a serious repair and the intended replacement borrowed car also needed a repair! The promised availability at the hotel of breakfast at 6:30am proved tricky since the restaurant was dark and locked at the time! However, we were no longer in a rush and Immanuel picked us up just after 9am. Apart from a stop for Immanuel to buy breakfast – a roasted corn on the cob brought from the roadside – and a call of nature we arrived about 2 and a half hours later at the FGC church building in Ibanda.



We were very warmly greeted by Robert Mugume, pastor of the congregation and regional leader, and others we had met in previous years. After some refreshments we started a rescheduled programme. We had agreed to teach on two themes, holiness (an encounter with Jesus, not the rule book) and love is the highest peak (in the kingdom). 304 people were registered for the conference, many of whom travelled long distances to attend and at personal financial cost. The teaching was very well received and again following the teaching on forgiveness we received many testimonies of people being set free from bitterness and unforgiveness, seeking the forgiveness of those they had hurt and broken relationships being healed.



The same cook as two years ago had been employed so the lunches were excellent! On the first evening Robert came back to the hotel for a soda (Sprite, Coke etc) and we had a long chat with him and Immanuel about establishing a freedom culture, a culture of honour and related matters. These 'iron sharpening iron' conversations are every bit as important as the conference sessions.

On the second day an offering was held for an elderly retired pastor and regional bishop which was a great blessing as there is no pension provision for these retired servants of God. But he was even more blessed by those who, following the teaching, went to him to ask forgiveness for bad attitudes they had held against him during his ministry.

That evening we had a long conversation with Immanuel about transition at SCF, the implications for my involvement in our World Connections in the future, but our on-going commitment to him and Erioth whatever the changes.

Our final lunch at Ibanda was at the home of Dr Benson. He has purchased a beautiful plot of land on a hilltop, surrounded by other higher, green decked hills on all sides. He is in the process of building a suite of buildings for his own family, but has a vision to host visiting ministries like ourselves well in order to save the cost of hotel accommodation. We were given a generous welcome and excellent lunch before moving on to Kamwenge to reconnect with Pastor John Nyamwema and the team there.



He met us at a new and well-appointed hotel he had found which was a significant improvement on our experience previously. The staff were young and clearly determined to give their guests a good experience.

We arrived at the church premises later than planned on the Thursday morning, but were greeted in a way unique to my experience in Africa. The church works with an organisation 'Fields of Life' which pays for a primary school for 370 primary children. Two lines of the children, accompanied by a drummer, met us at the edge of the village and escorted us, marching and singing, to the venue.



We taught the same themes here with a very similar impact with people saying this was exactly what they needed. We were so grateful to God for this confirmation of what we had planned months before. Our interpreters, Dennis and Edison, from the first conference travelled to interpret for us here too and did an excellent job. Edison is now an expert in Essex speak! At the end of the conference great honour and heartfelt appreciation was expressed to us, and a gift of an African style 'shirt' was given to us in both places.



500+ people attended this conference. As in Ibanda people travelled long distances, and those without a bike had a 15km walk along an up and down 'maram' (hard earth) road before reaching a tarmac road where their journey on public transport could begin. By the end of our time in the western region there was an increased sense of connection and relationship with leaders and their congregations in the area.

Saturday saw the long road trip back to Masaka, visiting Dennis' wife's shop to pick up some foodstuffs and provision for Immanuel. We spent the afternoon with Immanuel and his regional team. We have never met with this group before and we had an excellent time with them. They are great guys who have been fathered by Immanuel over the years and have grown to maturity. All of them are zone pastors as well as congregational leaders. We encouraged them to see their excellent team culture and discipling / training

ministry reproduced in other regions of the country. At the end of our time with them Peter prophesied over them and we prayed for them. We felt this was a very fruitful meeting whose outcome could be significant for the FGC network across the country.

Our final evening was with Fred and Irene. Compassion International, who fund the children's centre in Kirinda which Fred oversees, have extended their normal limit on contracts for another 2 years, a unique event in Africa. The Aids programme has proved so successful that it has attracted government funding and their coffee plant scheme has proved successful in enabling local people to establish a stable source of income.

At our final Sunday morning in Nyendo Peter preached and we both shared words of knowledge to which people responded. And after lunch we were on the road to Entebbe to catch our flight back home.

It was on this trip that I finally cracked the difference between an African and European mind-set about time. In Africa time is a guide-line, in Europe it is a deadline. If a meeting is due to start at 10:30am and it is 10:34am, in Europe we are already 4 mins late. In Africa, we are not late, we just haven't started yet. In Africa time is elastic, in Europe it is a tight-rope.

Over and over again people told us how much they appreciated our willingness to travel so far and at such cost (we were able to make a significant contribution to the costs of the conferences as well as our own travel, accommodation and food costs) to be with them and share God's Word with them. Many never see a Christian leader or teacher from outside their own nation. It is a privilege to serve these hungry people and none of this would be possible without the generosity of the church family at SCF. We pass on to you their heartfelt thanks.

Mark Churchward August 2019

