

VISITING URC MISSION PARTNER ALISON GIBBS IN ZAMBIA

I offered: 'I could go to Lusaka on the way to Harare'. As you do. I was in a discussion about the fact that the URC's last remaining long-term missionary really ought to receive a pastoral visit, and it did seem that I might be best placed to make it.

Alison Gibbs has been a missionary (mission partner) since 1985, serving in the Solomon Isles from 1985 to 1993, in Tuvalu from 1993 to 1997, and then in Zambia since 1997. She is an experienced teacher and, for a good while now, has worked as a headteacher in a succession of schools in Zambia.

Offering to go to Lusaka en route to Harare was actually quite reasonable. One of the potential carriers was Emirates who fly via Dubai and then on to Harare, but with a brief stop in Lusaka.

The only thing is that I had not bargained for the fact that Alison actually taught in Mwenzo, close to the border with Tanzania, and a long way from Lusaka. So, on the last day of November 2017, I left the snow of Cambridge, exchanged it for the 28 degree heat of Lusaka and, the day after arriving in Zambia, was collected at 6.10am for the drive to Mwenzo. With an amazing driver (named Moses) it was almost non-stop even though we did not arrive at Alison's home until 8.45pm!



With the Presbytery Bishop and his wife, also ordained

The next day was Sunday and I attended a big united service of all the local congregations of the United Church of Zambia at the neighbouring town of Nakonde. The special service was to honour the Bishop, a lovely man with whom I had a fascinating conversation after the service in which he described something of the problems of the area. He told me that many of the local people were subsistence farmers, mainly growing maize because the government would buy the surplus crop. However, the government had recently reduced the price they would pay, causing a great deal of financial difficulty. He also talked about the difficulty of finding clergy for a very rural presbytery, with the result that ministers frequently look to move on after just three or four years. By contrast, he, himself, was very committed to the area, having served in that presbytery for the whole of his ministry.



Procession before Worship

There was great singing, with plenty of movement, four choirs each of which sang an anthem, various speeches and a powerful sermon by the resident minister, who spoke on 3 John and our need to live the way that Christ demonstrates. As the Bishop was present, I felt honoured to be asked to pronounce the benediction.

The service began with the clergy – quite a lot of us were present – processing around the grounds in which the church was set, following the Boys' Brigade band and on to a makeshift stage which was really the steps at the front of the church. The service was outside because so many were present, with various shelters rigged up as protection from the hot sun.



Sunday Service at Nakonde - one of the choirs

The following day I was able to visit the school, though things were quiet as many of the pupils had left for the end of term, and Christmas holidays. The school year in Zambia follows the calendar year, and so end-of-year exams had recently been completed.



Mwenzo School

The school was impressive, though very different from what would be expected with UK standards. It is a boarding school for 450 girls – there are no day girls. They have dormitory accommodation and offer a full range of subjects. A big struggle comes from the restrictions on running water – there often is none - particularly difficult with 450 girls. There is a computer lab, but just fifteen computers, though they were waiting for more to arrive. However, frequent and lengthy power cuts anyway reduce their usefulness. The science labs were also struggling for equipment. One difference from UK schools is that agriculture is firmly on the curriculum and the school has

quite a large area where various crops are grown, with the hope that the school can become more self-sufficient through what they grow.

The next day it was back to Lusaka – and fourteen or fifteen hours in the truck.

Before flying on to Harare, I had a day in Lusaka. I visited the central offices of the United Church of Zambia and had the opportunity to give the address at staff prayers. I also visited the office of the Presbytery of Lusaka and had a conversation with the Presbytery Bishop; and I was interviewed on the United Church of Zambia's radio station about the URC's thinking on discipleship and, in particular, the promotion of 'holy habits'.

It was great to enjoy a Zambian welcome, including that from the United Church of Zambia's Secretaries for Education and for Health, a married couple, mission partners from the Church of Scotland – and we discovered that Keith and I went to the same primary school in Greenock!

Two years later I found myself back in Zambia – but that's another story.

Paul Whittle