Our African Experience in the Summer of 2008

We had a fun and challenging trip to Africa. We left Saturday, May 24, from St. Louis. We used the local van service, BART, to get us to the airport. The van ran late, and we barely made our first flight, but we did make it. We flew to Minneapolis, and had to wait for five hours before our eight-hour flight to Amsterdam. That flight was pretty smooth. We had a wait of five hours before our flight to Entebbe Uganda. We met the rest of the team from our church in Amsterdam, and the nine of flew on the same flight to Entebbe. We arrived in Entebbe on Sunday at 11PM local time, after another eight-hour flight. We cleared customs, and picked up our bags, then spent the night at the Entebbe Flight Hotel, which was pretty basic in accommodations. It was our first night sleeping under mosquito netting. Besides Ruth and I, the team consisted of Darryl, a physician; Dan, an ER nurse; April, a Southeast graduate in nursing; Jessica, April's cousin, who is a senior at Southeast majoring in interior design; JD, April's dad, who is a farmer; Brandy, who is a special education teacher; and Joel, our team leader, who manages a hotel and restaurant chain in Cape.

Monday, we went back to the airport, and loaded up on a single-engine plane at African Inland Mission (AIM) operates. We flew first to Bukoba, a city on the west side of Lake Victoria just inside Tanzania, to clear customs and immigration then flew to Kahunda, on the south side of Lake Victoria. We ate lunch there, then traveled by boat to Ikuza island, in the Southwest part of the lake. Ikuza is a relatively large island, with a fishing village. Our missionary friends, Dale and Chris Hamilton, are setting up a medical clinic on the island, as there is no medical care there. Dale is a pilot, and Chris is a nurse. We rested and settled in after we arrived, although lots of people came to watch us: there are no Caucasians on the island normally, as Chris and Dale actually live on another island further to the north. Tuesday, we started working on the clinic, assembling equipment they had brought in earlier, painting rooms and cabinets, inventorying medicines and supplies, and doing other assorted tasks. Darryl and Mary-Jane (a nurse from South Africa who also works with the Hamiltons) started seeing a few patients in the afternoon. The people were surprised that Darryl, who is African-American, did not speak Swahili.

Wednesday through Saturday the team continued to get the clinic set up, and to see more patients. Ruth was working in the lab, looking for malaria and parasites in blood and stool samples under the microscope, as well as doing some urine and pregnancy testing. I helped her out some, as sometimes there were lots of tests to do. Dan and April helped out with treating some patients, and the rest of the team did a lot of painting and varnishing, as well as digging a drainage ditch, laying some pipe for the lab sink, and pouring concrete around that area. We also attended prayer meetings with the local church on Wednesday and Friday. We held a play-day for the children on the island on Thursday, and showed the videos "The Perfect Storm" and "The Passion of the Christ" on Friday night.

The weather was quite temperate for being so close to the equator, and it got cool at night. It rained a couple times during the week, but other wise it was mostly clear and sunny. There was no electricity on the island, except for generators, so the nights were very clear, and we could see the stars very clearly – the Milky Way was clearly visible at night. We ate meals with the church people there, and got to know them a little bit. Pastor Max and his wife Rebekah were very kind and gracious. We paid a daily fee for food, and we ate a variety of local foods, including tilapia from the lake, chicken, and goat, fruits (bananas, pineapple, and papaya), and ugala, which is a staple made from either corn or cassava, and resembles thick grits. We drank mostly bottled water, although there was coffee, too.
Sunday, June 1, we packed up and boated out to another island, Rubondo, where there is a resort where one of the Hamilton's sons works. Ruth got to ride in Dale's seaplane, so she had a five minute plane ride, instead of the 90 minute boat ride. We ate lunch there, and relaxed a bit, then boarded two small AIM planes to fly us back to Entebbe. We arrived about 5, and said goodbye to the rest of the team, who flew back to the states, their flight leaving at 11PM. We spent the night at Sophies hotel in Entebbe, which was nicer than the Flight hotel. We ate dinner at the hotel restaurant. Ruth ordered a ham sandwich and some potatoes, while I ordered the BEST (Bacon Eggs, Sausage, and Tomatoes). They brought two eggs, two sausage links, a sliced tomato, and six pieces of bacon! While I was eating, they brought another six pieces of bacon. Needless to say, I did not eat 12 pieces of bacon!

We were up early Monday, since we had to be at the airport two hours before our flight to Nairobi, Kenya, left at 5:10 AM. We had a short layover in Nairobi, before we caught our Air Malawi flight to Blantyre, Malawi, with a short stop in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. We got into Blantyre about noon, and were met at the airport by Heidi Hannah, a missionary with Serving In Ministry (SIM). We met Heidi while she was a junior high age girl in Cape, and kept in touch with her while she was in college at Southeast, but hadn't seen her for 15 years. Her husband, Ryan, is the country director for SIM in Malawi, where there are a total of 32 SIM missionaries. They have three children: Caleb, 12; Ben, 10; and Faith, 7. Heidi took us by SIM headquarters to meet Ryan and other workers, then took us home to relax.

Tuesday we accompanied Heidi and Helen, another SIM worker from the UK who is a nurse, on some Home-Based Care visits, where they visit people who are often ostracized because of the illnesses they have, such as HIV. During the visits, Helen asks them about their health, records any changes, distributes Tylenol and vitamins, they encourages them with the Bible and prayer. Most of the people we met with didn’t speak English well, so Ruth and I just greeted the people and observed, but we shared some scripture and prayed with one English-speaking lady.
After we ate lunch, we went shopping. Blantyre has some modern grocery stores, as well as lots of little shops. Parking is an adventure, since more people have bought cars recently. Ruth bought some traditional Malawian fabric, a nice purple print. We went to a local dressmaker that Heidi has used ("Mama Africa" is the name of her business). Ruth got measured, and Heidi will bring the dress with her when they return to the states next month. At night, we went to the elementary school, where they had some telescopes set up. We saw Saturn and its rings, as well as Mars and Alpha Centauri, along with various other constellations. All of us had fun.

Wednesday, we went with Ryan, Hans-Jurgen (SIM associate director from Germany), Jenna and Beth (SIM short-term interns from the US and the UK), James (a Malawian who works with the Evangelical Association of Malawi), and Fostens (a pastor from the African Evangelical Church) to Zomba, a city in eastern Malawi. We were attending and helping out at a conference of about 140 church pastors and leaders on share the gospel effectively with Moslems. Ryan brought a sound system, which we helped set up. James was the emcee, and there were three speakers in the morning. After lunch, there was a panel discussion by the three speakers, then they broke up into seven groups to discuss what they had learned and how they could use it. Afterwards, we distributed three books and five pamphlets to each participant. We loaded up, and headed back to Blantyre. Driving after dark is a challenge, even on the main roads, since there are a no lights on the highway, and lots of people are walking and riding bicycles, even after dark. After we got back, we picked up Heidi and the kids, and went out to each at an Italian restaurant, where we had pizza and a couple pasta dishes.
Thursday we loaded up in the car early with Heidi and Candy (another SIM short-term intern from the US), and headed out to the capital city, Lilongwe, about a four-hour drive. Heidi and Candy had a meeting with some other missionaries and a couple from the US who were looking to start a new ministry in Malawi. We sat in the meeting, but couldn't participate much. After lunch, we headed to the Partners in Hope hospital. Various Christian organizations have worked to set the hospital up, and SIM has a doctor and a medical technologist working there. The hospital offers free treatment for HIV-positive patients, and sees people with other illnesses for a fee. We toured the hospital, and met with the SIM doctor and medical technologist. Afterwards, we headed to the motel (Korea Gardens, run by Koreans), rested up some, and ate dinner. Two other SIM missionaries invited us over for dessert, and then we headed back to the motel to sleep.

Friday, June 6, we ate breakfast about 8 at the motel: potatoes, sausages, toast and juice. Heidi and Candy took us to the airport about 10, then headed back to Blantyre. Ruth and I made it thru the airport, and boarded our Air Malawi plane. To get to Zambia, which is immediately west of Malawi, we had to fly 2.5 hours south to Johannesburg, South Africa, then fly north 2.5 hours to Lusaka, Zambia, the capital city. We arrived about 5:30 PM, cleared immigration and customs fairly quickly, and found the van driver for our hotel, the Lusaka Chrismar Hotel. Since we had been fed on both flights, we were not hungry, and just rested in our room before going to bed. We had to be ready at 5:30 AM Saturday morning to catch a cab back to the airport: there was some problem with the van. We got to the airport, then waited awhile for the domestic part of the terminal to open, since we needed to fly to Ndola, Zambia. Zambian Airways had a number of flights scheduled, all of which left late, but finally we got off the ground, and arrived in Ndola about 9:15 AM. My colleague from the Chemistry Department at Southeast, Marcus Bond, was at the airport to meet us with a driver and vehicle from Copperbelt University, to take us to Kitwe, where the Bonds live and where Copperbelt University is. Marcus is on a Fulbright fellowship in Zambia, and has about two months left before he comes back to the states. Since I was giving a talk to Copperbelt University on Monday, they sent a van to pick me up, as well as to drop off another speaker they had earlier in the week.
After we got to Marcus and Barbara's house, we rested a bit, then headed to a going away party for Damian, a German student who was leaving to go back home. The Bonds are Catholic, and Damian had spent a year doing volunteer work for one of the parishes in Kitwe. Although the event was scheduled to start at noon, things were running on Zambian time, and it really didn't get started until about 2 PM. After different people spoke and sang, we ate and talked with folks. We left about 5:30. Marcus and Barbara don't have a car, so we used a taxi. They have gotten to know one driver pretty well, so they just call him on his cell phone, and if he is available, he comes and takes them where they need to go fairly inexpensively. The Bonds live in a university-owned house, but the university doesn't maintain it very well. Some of the lights and power outlets didn't work (such as the ones in our bedroom and bathroom), so it was good that we had the flashlights we used while we were on the island in Tanzania.

Sunday, we went to church with the Bonds. Their Catholic church has an English language mass. We rode a minibus to church. It's hard to describe how the minibus system really works. They have routes of sorts, but each bus is in competition with the others for riders. Each bus has a conductor, who vigorously tries to recruit riders at each stop, and packs them into his bus as tightly as possible. A minibus can have as many as 14-16 riders on what we might call a ten-passenger vehicle. Afterwards, we went to the butcher shop for some meat, then came home and ate. Marcus and I went up to the University, so I could make sure that my presentation still worked that I had put on a CD and on my other magnetic storage device. Barbara and Ruth picked us up in a taxi, and we went to a school that Barbara had been helping some at, taking some books for the students. To get there, we had to cross a river in small boats, as there was no bridge. See below.
After we left the school, we went home and prepared dinner, and invited Gerard to come. Two Malawian guys who work for the Bonds were showing Barbara how to make a native dish, and the power went out. Power is cut off 2-3 times a week. The two guys finished dinner on the grill outside, so we could eat. Power came on after about 2.5 hours.

Monday, I went with Marcus to Copperbelt University. We walked, and it took about 25 minutes. Marcus has two classes on Monday, a physical chemistry class for chemical engineering students at 8AM, that meets Mondays and Thursdays, and an Inorganic chemistry class that meets at 10:30 AM, and also on Friday. I sat in on both classes. In some ways, they are typical lecture classes, except that the students don’t have textbooks, so they get as much from lecture, then get books from other sources to learn the material and work problems. Marcus generates handouts and supplemental material for the students to use as well. Ruth and Barbara went shopping in the morning, and we met them downtown for lunch, after another minibus ride. We ate at the Perfect Pie Factory, which specializes in meat pies, which were actually quite good. After lunch, we took a taxi back to the University, and I looked over my notes again for my talk at 3PM. The talk went well, although I may have gone over the students' heads in spots, since they haven't had biochemistry. Afterwards, we went to the University bookstore, and bought a book on African birds. We then took a minibus to a restaurant, and had pizza for dinner.

Tuesday morning, Ruth, Barbara and I went downtown to shop some, while Marcus went to the University to make arrangements to get us to the airport, then met us downtown. We bought some African-shaped wooden plaques to hang on the wall, as well as to give to the people who were watching our hose while we were gone, as well as a Zambian shirt for me. You are expected to haggle on the prices, and Barbara was an expert haggler! Afterwards, we went home, ate lunch, then went to the airport. We had to wait a while to check our luggage, but otherwise it was uneventful.
Our flight left Ndola at 5:30 PM on Tuesday, and we arrived in Johannesburg about 8 PM. Our flight to Amsterdam left at 11:30 PM, and arrived in Amsterdam about 10 AM Wednesday morning: all of these places are on the same time zone. We had a three-hour layover in Amsterdam before our eight-hour flight to Detroit. It was in Detroit that we discovered that one of our pieces of luggage was still in Amsterdam. Our plane out of Detroit was late in arriving, so we were about 1.5 hours late getting into St. Louis. The BART van waited for us, so we groggily got aboard, and arrived home about 1:30 AM on Thursday, local time. YEAH!

Our missing luggage finally made it to the states on Friday, and was delivered to us on Saturday afternoon. Nothing was missing.

That's a brief synopsis of what we did. I can fill in more details if you are interested.

Us with sugarcane after crossing the river in Zambia, coming back from the school.