**Paul’s Secret**

**The Link between St Illogan Parish and St Andrew’s Church, Mvumi, Tanzania**

Reading our Bibles can have unexpected consequences! One Wednesday in May 2007, the home group my late wife (Jan) and I were members of, was studying Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. We read these words.

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4 v 11b – 13).*

As we discussed, we quickly concluded that, although we live in plenty, our society does not permit us to be content with that, demanding that we seek bigger, better and newer stuff, with all the latest gadgets! As for being content in need, how is that even possible? At that point in our lives, recently retired from working in education in the UK, Jan and I had just agreed to spend three months in a church boarding school in Tanzania, to run in-service training for its teachers. And so, after a time of prayer, Jan and I were commissioned by the home group to establish a link with a church in Mvumi, with the aim of discovering more about being content while in need.

The following Sunday Jan and I shared this idea with our friends at St Mary’s Church, Portreath, wondering whether it was a project for the church rather than just for the home group. We were overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response. Later, our Rector decided that the whole parish of St Illogan would be involved, although the focus of commitment has always been largely through St Mary’s.

Mvumi is situated in central Tanzania, 7 hours from Dar es Salaam (the former capital city and major port) and 1 hour from the new capital Dodoma. It is in the Anglican Diocese of Central Tanganyika and lies amidst rolling hills in a semi-arid rural area inhabited by the Gogo tribe of subsistence farmers.

Once in Mvumi, we were introduced by the Headmaster to one of the local Anglican churches and felt at home there. We assumed that we would link with that church, but God had other ideas! When we invited the pastor and his wife to have supper with us, intending to discuss a potential link, every time we raised the idea, our guests totally failed to understand what we were suggesting. It was quite extraordinary, and very puzzling. We were left with just 3 weeks in the village to find a different church link! The very next day we received an invitation from our good friend, Dr Simon Walton, a CMS missionary doctor, working in the hospital in the village. The following Sunday, we attended the consecration of a new Anglican church just outside the village, St Thomas’s. For some years, the congregation had been meeting under the shade of a large mango tree, but the congregation had grown faster than the tree’s shade. One of Simon’s supporting churches (St Thomas’s, Lancaster) had funded the building of a simple sun-baked mudbrick church building. It was an incredibly special occasion of celebration (lasting several hours!) and provided an opportunity to meet Christians from Lancaster and to discover more about church links.

On our final Sunday in Mvumi, Simon introduced us to St Andrew’s Church and everything fell into place. He was seeking to find a link church in the UK for them and the pastor and church elders understood what we were proposing. At that time the church structure was deteriorating, and it had become far too small for the congregation. Mud sun-baked brick buildings have quite a short life because, although the area suffers from drought for much of the year, when it does rain, the downpour gradually returns the bricks to the earth. In fact, sadly, ten years after celebrating the opening of St Thomas’s, it was quite difficult to tell that there had ever been a significant building on the site. St Andrew’s had decided to use breeze-block construction for their new church, again with assistance from UK churches. It took years to construct, using almost entirely, the labour of the congregation – everyone wanted to play their part, even the children. It was a joy for our church to be able to fund the galvanised metal sheets to form the roof. Later we were able to provide the materials for the congregation to build a house for the pastor, as that enabled the bishop to send a young pastor rather than to continuing to use the services of retired clergy who happened to live in the area.

But, although buildings are important, and it has been good to share the riches we have, to support our brothers and sisters in worship and ministry, our link is really about people.

In 2008, Jan and I returned to Tanzania for 4 years to train the teacher-trainers in the largest teacher college in the country. Although we were living 5 dusty hours away from Mvumi, we were able to spend occasional long weekends in the village. As we walked around, with Pastor Agnes, surrounded by great poverty (but also much happiness) she said to us “ It is so difficult to share the love of God with these people, without the means to help them physically”. There is much hunger in the village and, as there is no national health service, all medicine and health care (except for childbirth, TB and HIV) has to be paid for or gone without.

As a result, we met with the church leaders and proposed establishing the Mvumi Hardship Fund to allow small grants to be made each month to help the poorest to buy food and/or medicine. We were asked “Is this money for church members or for everyone?” I asked them “In the light of this mornings sermon (on the Good Samaritan!), what do you think?” “It’s for everyone” they replied.

Over the years, we have been able to double the amount of help we give each month (currently £200) and the fund has been administered with scrupulous attention to detail. We were concerned to minimise the risk of money being misappropriated, and so provided a system for their committee to use. The fund has made a huge difference to many families and the village people have often been surprised that the Christians do not just look after themselves, they help everyone. Quite a few new church members have resulted initially from acts of practical love.

Over the years Jan and I had the immense privileged of being invited into the simple homes of some of those the fund had helped. Delightfully, although we fear that we might be intruding, in Tanzania any visitor to a home is seen as a blessing. Some of my most precious memories are of the privilege of those visits, sitting on the traditional stools (about 6 inches above the ground), of discovering about their lives and being able to pray with them. We have often left in tears.

In 2016, Jan and I were able to organise a party of 11 parishioners to visit the village. We stayed for a week and trained a team of local mothers about how children learn through play. We enabled the church to fulfil its desire to set up a playschool for the village in the refurbished old church building. Our Rector, Steve Robinson, led a daily study session around the book of Amos, as we sought to understand more of God’s heart for the poor. Any such visit comes as a huge challenge to our western way of thinking and to our priorities and is often transformational. I long to return with another group!

It is really important that our link is not just a financial one. There is regular communication between the churches and we often pray for each other. When in the village I am often asked to preach, although I need a translator! Using my mobile phone, the Mothers’ Union Choir of St Andrew’s were able to sing for a member of our church for whom they had been praying, as he approached the end of his life.

Jan died in 2017 and her memory will live on in the village for years. I had planned to introduce my new wife, Diane, to Mvumi in September 2020, but it seems unlikely that will be wise because of the Covid-19 pandemic. God willing, we will be heading there as soon as it is safe to do so!

What lessons would I want to share with a church thinking about establishing such a link?

* Unless it is of God, the plan will fail, and vulnerable people may get harmed. This is not an area where the schemes of man are likely to make any lasting impact. But, with the Lord, as Paul had learnt, we can do anything!
* Work with the local people. They understand their situation better than we can ever do! One of the advantages of being a developing nation is that it does not have to make the same mistakes ours made in development! This attitude is both wise and wins many friends. Trying to impose our ideas in a different culture is insensitive and unloving. We must go to learn from them.
* There are many churches in developing countries which would love to make a link with a ‘rich’ western church, seeing the link church merely as an ATM. Such links lead to ever increasing requests for money, often for extravagant building projects, or assets which will not be maintained or much used.

I would invite any church to prayerfully consider whether God is encouraging the congregation to share the wealth it has with our brothers and sisters in the developing world, and to be open to the enrichment that true fellowship with them will provide.

David Townend