

## LSM Mission trip, June 14-30, 2008, Cameroon, Africa

*Just a few words of explanation: First, this is less of a report in the formal sense, and more a collection of stories with some reflection from our time. I am purposefully resisting trying to line out in a "convincing" way what our accomplishments were or "proving" that it was a successful trip. Rather, my hope is that you will be able to enter into the experience a bit, and then you can draw your own conclusions. Second, these thoughts are only from my perspective. You will gather a much fuller picture of the time if you make the effort to ask other team members what their impressions were as well, as God will have shown different things to others. You deserve to hear their stories, and they deserve to have you ask them--I encourage you to do so. Finally, my hope is that as you read this, you do so not merely to gather information about what we did, but rather to allow God to show you what He's doing, and allow him to speak to you in your own life through our experiences. -Jeremy Martin*

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"There's the airstrip to our left!" I looked down and saw the runway. Its span was about 700 yards, width of about 30 yards, on about a 10 degree angle up the side of a mountain--kept clear by machete. The edges were lined with people--dozens of black faces with great white smiles--a few fearful children, but mostly men and women grinning from ear to ear, singing, and greeting--a grand celebration. "Too ntay!" (sounds like "taunt eye") they said. "Welcome!" "You are welcome!" (Literally "Come Well") It was the phrase we probably heard the most over the span of two weeks. Whether we visited someone's home, or a church, or walked in the market; whether it was a mayor, or an old woman passing in the street: "Too ntay!" "Welcome!" The Noni people know how to make a person feel welcome. We were the honored guests, and they made sure we knew it. It wasn't just the handshakes. It was the look in the eye. It was the children who ran out smiling and waving every time we drove by. It was the meals prepared for us. It was the programs, speeches, and music rehearsed and performed. It was the fact that the welcome came not just from a few, but from everyone we met. I have much to learn from this kind of hospitality.

The clock on the living room wall in Dave and Cindy Lux's home read 1:00. The batteries were long dead, and no one bothered to change them. Anytime anyone

asked for the time, the response was always "One o' clock!" Whether light or dark, morning, afternoon, or evening, our time stood still. At least, that's how it felt. Oh, there were a few of us that had a working watch, so if we really needed to know the hour, we weren't helpless. But for us, the frozen clock stood as a symbol of time and place where people mattered, and schedule did not; a place where there was no hurry--and no need for it. It was, like Narnia, a place where time seemed to pass at a different rate than in other worlds, and even in returning you're never quite sure how long it has been.

Dave and Cindy Lux, the Wycliffe missionaries who served as our hosts while in Cameroon, had told me the story about Charles at some point earlier in the trip. We were driving somewhere, and we got to talking about the AIDS rate in Noni. He said he didn't know the exact percentage, but guessed it was around 1 in 8 that were HIV positive. Then he began telling me about Charles. Charles had grown up in their compound (immediate neighborhood), had done quite well in school, and had gotten a good job in the city. He faithfully sent money back to help his family in the village, and was his mother's best hope for financial security. However, he fell in love with one of the concubines of a village chief, and before long he fell ill. Test results confirmed that he had contracted HIV, and within a year he was in the hospital. He had grown well enough to be released to his family in the village, but now was on his deathbed. In fact, he was staying in the house next door to the Luxes, where we were staying. On Sunday morning before church Dave and Cindy told me they were going to pray for Charles, and invited me to come along. As we walked into the room, Charles' mother, happy to see us, yet clearly worn from weeks of caring for her son and bearing the burden of watching his life slip away, welcomed us, and told us how Charles had not eaten the previous day. Charles lay shaking under the thin blanket on the bed, eyes closed. I felt quite out of place, yet I watched as Dave and Cindy ministered--reminding Charles of the things he had done to love his family, calling him to place his faith in Jesus, caring for the mother who stood by the bed, and the nephew who stood against the wall, sobbing.

As we left the house, we agreed that it would be good to have the entire group come back that afternoon to sing a few songs for Charles from outside the window. After church and lunch when we announced to the group that we were going to go and sing, there was no outright refusal, but there was definitely unspoken resistance. We had a free afternoon scheduled, after all, and this was eating into that free time. But we walked over, and gathered around his window, and began to sing. One song, then another, then another. As we sang, lifting up words of promise, words of encouragement, words of hope, I really don't know what was going on in Charles' spirit. But I do know that God's Spirit settled upon us, and we were softened. As after singing, weeping, and praying for a man that none from our

group except me had even seen, I walked away amazed at how God could take our reluctant obedience and turn it into a sacred space.

Banso Baptist Hospital is perhaps the premier hospital in Cameroon. While there are some foreign doctors, the leadership is all Cameroonian. People come from across the country to be treated at BBH, and it's reputation is solid. Many, many Muslim Fulani people, which are spread throughout multiple countries in Africa, have warmed to the gospel because of the care they have received through BBH. We had a chance to spend about half a day at the hospital, getting a tour, and ministering--handing out matchbox cars, candy, packets of hot chocolate, balloon animals, Polaroid pictures, praying with/for patients, and singing. The children's ward, the children's cancer ward, and the mother/baby ward were the favorites. For me as a youth pastor, I get double joy, because I see the joy that springs up in the child who is receiving a gift and from the mothers who share their children's joy, but I also get the joy of watching my kids minister--watching God use them to pour out His love. One of the sacred places during that day was in the mother/baby ward, when we got to hold and pray for Violet. Violet had been found just a week and a half earlier in a pit toilet where her mother had given birth and left her to die. We got to be a part of God's redemptive plan for her--holding her, speaking words of love, hope, and promise to her and in prayer.

The first Friday we were there we visited the Lassin literacy center, and Noni translation room. Wycliffe Bible Translation focuses on the work of providing a written language to people groups who don't have their language written, and in the process, they also translate the scriptures into that language. The literacy center is the place in the village where language training happens--where teachers are taught how to teach in their own language, where books are kept (both in English, and in the native language), and where the Bible translation happens. On this particular Friday, we had gotten a tour of the literacy center, and were getting ready to "watch" how Bible translation happens. We all filed into a back room. In it three men sat behind laptops around 3 tables. Each had 7 or 8 translations of the bible open. A small bookshelf held a variety of dictionaries, commentaries, and other assorted references. They were working through the book of John, they said, and the current verse was John 8:54: *Jesus replied: "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me."* They read it to us in English, then spoke to each other in Noni, discussing the verse. This was just an example for us to watch. Normally they have a fourth person in the room--a scribe, who records not only the final translation, but the course of the conversation in getting there. If there is disagreement on how something should be translated, it is recorded (i.e. Jonah thought this word would

be best, Alfred thought this word); the scribe records it all. After a few minutes, they had come up with the Noni translation, and they read back the translation to us in English: *Jesus replied: "If I give myself a big head, my big head means nothing. My Father is the One who gives me a big head, the One whom you claim as your God."*

As I stood watching and listening, I realized again that I was in sacred space. What does it mean to say that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired words of God? What does it mean to say that the Holy Spirit wrote these words? This was history playing out in front of us--the words of scripture that the Holy Spirit would use to transform Noni lives long into the future--these were being decided on here in a small mud house deep in the mountains of West Africa, by men we had eaten lunch with and hiked with and talked with. The incredible mystery of a partnership between Holy God and earthy people played out before our eyes. Perhaps hearing me describe it this way makes you nervous. For me, it makes me realize that maybe I have more in common with Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, Isaiah, Noah, Moses, and David, Esther, Ruth, Rebecca, and Paul than I once thought. Perhaps these were real, normal, everyday, Spirit-filled people too.

A number of years ago, CVCC gave about \$5,000 to help fund the making of the Jesus film in Noni. We had a chance to see the room where the recording was done, and meet a number of people who did the voices for the film. We also attended two showings of the film, run by Pastor Alfred and a few others. When the film was first shown in the Noni villages, hundreds of people responded to the salvation message. Now, as showings continue, the number of conversions is down (there were 2 who came forward following one showing). However, we observed many people quoting the movie as they watched. The story was becoming embedded in their hearts and minds. In fact, we began to understand that the primary challenge in Noni now is not getting the people familiar with the story of Jesus, but rather helping them trust Jesus alone. The tendency is to be a "Christian" yet still offer goat sacrifices as part of their traditional religious practices. So as they continue to read and hear the truths of Scripture, we pray that they will leave behind more and more of the false practices, and live more and more by the scriptural truths.

They had never played "duck, duck, goose" before. So when our teens finally got them seated in a circle, we had to think quickly to decide what to call it. We didn't know the Noni word for duck or goose, so someone decided to use the words of their main dish--fufu & jama-jama. It didn't take long for the children to catch on, and game was quickly a hit. Laughter filled the yard as the small children who ran like gazelles chased the seemingly clumsy Americans to whom the wet grassy hill

seemed like a frozen pond. Ducking under the clothesline, trying not to fall off the ledge into the truck, it was quickly apparent that in the eyes of our teens, these were no longer African children; they were no longer black children; they were children. And the joy of being together was spilling out all over the yard, and filling our souls.

One morning we all loaded into the vehicles and headed out on a prayer walk/drive. We drove about 20 minutes up into the mountains, then unloaded and walked another 15-20 minutes ascending along a trail, through a cornfield, past a couple of huts (do you mind if we go through your yard?), until we reached a fence that overlooked what seemed to be half the country. As we gazed out, the Luxes pointed out to us different villages, and different language groups. There were literally dozens of different language groups within the area that we were observing. After getting the background on what we were seeing, we began praying. We prayed for the language groups where new translation work would be beginning in the next 2 years. We prayed for the new missionaries who were trying to get into one of these remote villages, but were having a number of setbacks. We prayed for a couple of village chiefs who were not getting along. We prayed for churches, and leadership, and God's kingdom to expand, and God's reign to be experienced throughout these remote lands where you had to hike for hours just to reach a particular village. Of course, there were no immediate results that we could see. No short term "proof" that we had used our time well. But walking back down the hill, and climbing back into the vehicles, we knew we had done what God asked.

Americans write and sing some good ballads. We have some good slow, reflective songs, and we sing many of them in our worship services. Africans, on the other hand, know how to get you dancing. You hear the beat of the drum, and you really can't help but move your feet. Forget slow and reflective. They know how to celebrate. Of course, the services are longer, and much more energetic than at home (at least in our fairly subdued Wesleyan Church), but the thing that most foreign to me in their worship service was the offering time. If any part of the service feels like a celebration, it is the offering time. There must have been some sort of order to it, although I couldn't tell how people knew, but the drums began, and soon the whole congregation was singing, and a line formed in the isles, as men and women, young and old, danced their way in a line to the back and on to the front where they deposited their gifts into the containers held by a number of ladies standing at the front. It was hard to believe that everyone could be so cheerfully giving, but if it was an act, it was incredibly well rehearsed. For 10-15 minutes during each service, they celebrated their gift of life, and their ability to give.