

# LESSONS FROM TANZANIA

by Father Stephen Karcher

## On To Africa

Before seeing Tanzania, I had some very simple ideas and impressions of what Africa might be like. Dominating the images in my mind were wild animals such as lions and tigers, giraffes and elephant herds. It is difficult to comprehend the sheer size of this continent until you begin to travel through it. Whether by automobile or plane the vastness of Africa is unbelievable. It took us 4 to 5 hours just to fly over the Sahara and Libyan deserts, and at different points as we peered through the window of the plane we could detect sand storms that must have climbed thousands of feet into the air, making it impossible to see any of the earth's surface. Tanzania itself is approximately the size of two California's, and although we did not run into any wild herds, we did meet up with an abundance of children. And it's here the vastness of the African continent meets its match. The average age of a Tanzanian is 17 years old, which means that probably half of the country's 40 million people are that age or younger. The children are everywhere; in cities, in villages, at every roadside. They make up the majority in church congregations and communities. When it is time for communion, the children come up first, they are joyful and energetic. The African land is vast and varied, the soil in Tanzania is rich and fertile, but the most beautiful thing about that country was to be able to look into the eyes of the children. Their eyes are clear, trusting and sincere. They reflect hope, and look for God's goodness.



## Apostolic Work

During my short trip to Tanzania this past July I had the awesome experience of witnessing first hand a vibrant apostolic ministry. Putting aside for a moment the obvious cultural differences, variations in climate, clothing, diet, modes of travel, etc., I would have to say that the greatest impression I've been left with is the powerful hand of God working through the bishop, his priests and staff as we saw how they minister selflessly to the Tanzanian people, devoted to the work of God and their fellow countrymen. For me, the time spent working with and witnessing the work of His Grace, Bishop Jeronymos of the Bukoba Diocese in Tanzania was almost as if I had stepped into the New Testament book of Acts.

*...Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*  
Acts 2:46,47.

Following vespers at 7pm in the church we were served dinner in the dining hall with the bishop at 8pm. These times together with the bishop in the dining hall became some of our most enjoyable and interesting. After dinner we all went upstairs and read the compline prayers together on the open balcony under the stars.

Stepping out of southern California and into east Africa is to make a big jump, literally and culturally, to be sure. But the Church in this region is experiencing enormous growth and development. In 1988 there were four Orthodox priests in the whole country. Today, the Diocese of Bukoba has forty priests, and 160 communities. Moreover, the Orthodox Christianity offered to the people is synonymous with development and progress. It has become a sign of spiritual and physical improvement. It is reminiscent of the apostolic age when the Gospel was first preached and the voice of the apostles was heard throughout the world “*to the ends of the earth*”, and Christianity became a civilizing and uniting force. At that time the preaching of the apostles gave the world a “new life” and a truly new and revolutionary way of living, bringing true freedom and liberation, spiritual joy and certain hope. This is what is happening in Tanzania today as thousands embrace the Gospel of Christ and join the Orthodox Church.

## Hospitality

*Now a bishop must be...hospitable.... 1 Timothy 3:2*

*A bishop, as God's steward, must be...hospitable, a lover of goodness....Titus 1:8*

Such a big part of the bishop's work is showing hospitality to guests. And from the moment we arrived in Africa until the time we left, his care for us was evident. We were met at the airport at Entebbe by a young man named Anastasios who worked closely with the bishop at the diocese office and also served the church as a chanter and acolyte. Our drive between Entebbe and Bukoba was not easy; it involves a time commitment of at least six hours and because of road conditions represents a significant sacrifice of energy. We broke up the trip and spent two nights in Kampala, about an hour drive from the airport. Throughout this time we were carefully looked after by Anastasios and given plenty of time to make our initial adjustments and recovery from travel. But it is a fact that throughout our whole stay in Africa, we were overwhelmed by the hospitality of these African Christians who so obviously (and happily) went out of their way to make us comfortable with more-than-enough food and meals, along with plenty of down time for rest and recuperation. The bishop made sure that every detail of our trip in Africa was attended to by members of his staff. Our accommodations were comfortable, we were never without mosquito netting, and we



always had access to water and showers (even while staying at the seminary in Kasikizi where conditions were much more primitive). Our transportation needs were always thoughtfully looked after, as well as our travel across borders and when certain among us needed to acquire entry and exit visas. Bottled water was put in every vehicle we traveled in. Every detail was thoughtfully looked after.

Whenever we were with the bishop we would take our meals together. He always remained very down to earth, humble and approachable. He would let us spend time with him; we would all eat together, laugh together and ask him whatever questions we could think of. He did not seem to have any expectations from us, except, as we found out the last night we were with him, he wanted us to remember and pray for him. In fact, it seemed that he enjoyed being together with us just to share the short time we had with each other. It was as if we were family.

But this is what loving virtue accomplishes when expressed. Our host's hospitality made us feel like family. Without any direct words expressed we knew that we were brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Romans 12:13.*

*Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 4:9.*



It was Tuesday morning and after waking we read 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> hour prayers in All Saints Church at the seminary in Kasikizi. At 8am we were scheduled to have breakfast but our hosts realized that we'd run out of coffee and tea. Not wanting to serve an incomplete breakfast, one young seminary student rode 5 kilometers to the nearest shop on a bicycle that had flat tires in order to fetch the

missing items. After that, he rode 5 kilometers back and helped serve our breakfast.

As our brothers and sisters expressed their love for God by extending to us every kindness and looking out for our every need, they truly pleased the Lord and showed themselves to be true Christians. For us, it was as if the New Testament came alive, and we saw with our own eyes the power of the word of God.

All of this helped remind me how fortunate we are as Orthodox Christians to have inherited a spiritual culture that recognizes the value of hospitality and caring for others and how important this is in order to authentically share Christ's love with one another.

Whether it's done by our Philoptochos organization and its various ministries, the Welcome committee that sets up a table every Sunday at the front doors of the church, the church festival organizers who invite the community to come "taste and see", or by individuals who cook a meal and invite another, this activity is part of the Lord's plan for our salvation and is a Christian quality that pervades the pages of the New Testament. After seeing how important an element this is to the work being done in Tanzania, and how the practice of hospitality is integrated into every aspect of the bishop's work, I realize how we must not waver or put off showing kindness to those whom the Lord sends our way.

### **"Give me Water"**

These words will be forever ingrained in my mind. They were spoken to me by a young boy, about 11 years old, outside our house at the seminary one afternoon while we were playing ball. The boy had finished school and on his way home (I guess) he'd passed by the seminary, seen by the football and doubt he was also had, and although only of the most precious world. It was something thousands of others like clean water. I had just



some foreigners, been attracted ventured over to join us. No attracted by the water bottle I two-thirds full, it contained one commodities in that part of the that this young boy, and him, didn't have any access to: handed the bottle to him when he put it to his lips and emptied it in seconds. Kids there do find water to drink, but it seems to take near Herculean effort to find and it's mostly always dirty. In this part of the world when one is thirsty even dirty water will do. The problem is that if and when the kids make it to adulthood, they've been sick so many times that their immune systems are weak, and their bodies wear out by the time they're forty-five years old.

But here in the Diocese of Bukoba, the utterance "give me water" has an evangelical meaning too, and Bishop Jeronymos understands this well, as did the apostle John.

*There came a woman from Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ... The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" ... Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." John 4:7ff.*

Not only does Bishop Jeronymos build churches, but he is involved with improving local infrastructure. This work includes agriculture and farming, building homes, and digging wells to provide sources of water. For instance, in the village of Kenya where he has established an Orthodox Parish he will be joined this year by a team from the Agriculture School at the University of Thessaloniki that will stay for six months. During their stay they'll help to establish farming, develop irrigation, build dwellings and run water lines to those new dwellings, all as part of the "beginning" of a major upgrade for that particular village. And not only this, but throughout his diocese of Bukoba, Bishop Jeronymos is building schools, hospitals, and clinics. However active the Diocese is in improving the quality of people's lives and bringing to them what we would consider to

be basic necessities, the most important work of all and by far the primary interest of the Bishop is in improving the “infrastructure” of human souls.

*Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water....” John 4: 13ff.*

The living water that Jesus gives is Himself, and the Bishop is eager to give Jesus Christ to as many people as he can possibly reach. This becomes plain every day as we visit different communities each with their church in which they gather, pray and worship. He is preparing his people to inherit Paradise, this is the first order of business. For what will it profit us, as Scripture says, to gain the whole world and forfeit our souls? He has taken care to see that each community has a specially trained catechist, one who can teach the faith and the music of the liturgy. In this way, as the people learn about their faith, they also become able to express their faith in energetic liturgical worship.

*The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. John 4:23*

As we worshiped with the Tanzanians we understood that we are all Christian brothers and sisters. In our liturgy we find the “unity of faith”, and realize that we are united even across the world by our prayer. Our shared Orthodox faith unites us not just with each other but also with our loved ones who have gone on before us.

In Africa, we quickly became overwhelmed with the enormous need that everybody has for some of the most basic items: clean water to drink, an antiseptic to stop the infection in an open wound, and the need to get more protein. We felt frustration at our inadequacy and inability to fix everything at once. But these feelings were tempered by the realization that while we may not be able to keep everyone from getting sick, we can help prepare them for that Eternal Life that Jesus speaks of so clearly in the Gospels.



Worship in the African churches takes on a different

quality because there is an acute sense that life is short. The infant mortality rate in Tanzania is high, about 7%, and if one is able to survive infancy and youth, life expectancy is still only about 50 years. These grim statistics illustrate the life and death

struggle that takes place in villages and cities of this country every day, but in spite of it all, it is the dynamic spiritual work that gives hope to all of us. And although it may take generations to fix some of the nagging problems in Tanzania, like the ability to provide adequate medical care and other health benefits, food and water, it takes only a moment for one to accept Christ's Gospel, become a Christian, and inherit Paradise. And I truly believe that although these people of Tanzania depart from life at a rate quicker than we're comfortable with, they are populating heaven and becoming inheritors of eternal good things in vast numbers more quickly than we can imagine, thanks to the apostolic work of people like Bishop Jeronymos.

## Departure



On the long flight back to Southern California I had plenty of time to think about my recent experience in Africa, the land and people, the churches and the budding faith of the Orthodox Christians in Tanzania. Thankful to God for his mercy throughout the duration of the trip, I can't help but be even more grateful for the example the bishop and his people gave me. The whole time spent with Bishop Jeronymos I could not get out of

my mind the example of another missionary bishop of our church, Innocent Veniaminov, later Metropolitan of Moscow and a canonized saint who labored in Alaska and literally became an apostle to the American land. He worked among the native people learning many of their languages, translating Scripture and liturgy, and baptizing thousands. His impressions of the Alaskan people remind me so much of our African brothers and sisters, allow me to finish with his words. St. Innocent says, "Although my flock is not very large numerically (18,500), in good examples it is far from being small. The Aleuts are not, as I had previously thought, the only ones who can (or could) share their last fish with those who are hungry. They are not the only ones who are patient, meek, obedient, peaceful, pious and so forth. Almost all of the peoples ... living in the Diocese of Kamchatka share these qualities. Only in their piety and loyalty to the Faith and the hearing of the Word of God are the Aleuts preeminent .... The more I become acquainted with them the more I love them and am convinced that we, for all our "enlightenment" have, without even noticing it, departed far, far from the paths of perfection. Many a so-called "unfortunate person" is morally far superior to us so-called "enlightened" people.... For example, the first Tungus whom I happened to see and speak with (in Gizhiga) amazed and comforted me by his faith and loyalty to God. He told me about his life.... I cannot recall these words without being moved – nor after this can I help but say in a spirit of thankfulness: "Blessed is the Lord Who reveals the knowledge of faith and truth to children but hides it from those who think themselves wise!"



***St. Paul's Short Term Mission Team 2***

***(Left to Right)***

***Alex Gorbenko, Alexis Boerger, Jennifer Schipsi, Father Stephen Karcher,  
Bishop Jeronymos, Stephanie Petas and John Smith***