

MISSION



September 2009



*The Changing Face of
Kenya*

Kenya Mission Team



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Returning to Canada

A circular portrait of Joe Jacek, a man with glasses and a light-colored shirt.

Joe Jacek

The Changing Face of Kenya

BY ALFRED GROLEAU, OMI



There have been astronomical changes in Kenyan society, particularly in the domains of education and urban development. Those called to proclaim Good News to the poor need to appreciate these many changes.

Though Kenya is facing many social and economical problems, it is deemed to be ahead of many of its neighbours on the continent. It is truly a developing country. Its development is shown in the expansion of education since independence and in the sprouting of its major cities. In both of these areas, however, the systems and structures have not kept pace with the growth. Moreover, the country has lost ground in its development, especially since the violence following the 2008 election.

Kenya shares the problems of many African nations: poverty, diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria, displacements of peoples, internal conflicts erupting in violence and a high rate of crime.

The Lonely Planet's 2006 edition of its tourist guide on Kenya highlights some salient points saying that education is a priority and the country's literacy rate is much higher than that of the surrounding countries. Despite this, poverty in the country continues to increase. The United Nations Human Development Report ranks Kenya at 144 of 179 countries. While the human development indices for most countries in Africa have risen since 1975, Kenya's peaked in 1990 and has since fallen drastically.

Education is of primary concern to Kenyans, who number more than 39,000,000. Literacy rates are around 85 per cent, considerably higher than in any of its neighbours.

Population growth has slowed because of the side effects of poverty and widespread HIV/AIDS infections. Due largely to the post-election conflicts of 2008, poverty in Kenya has increased.

This year, Kenya is facing famine. The destruction of crops during the violence is a prime cause; energies absorbed in the conflicts were not available to ward off this situation. The conflicts were not merely an issue of election procedures but they erupted because of unresolved land issues of the past. Dormant tribalism was awakened to fuel the violence. There are 42 ethnic groups in Kenya. The Kikuyu and Luos hold the positions of power. The violence caused the deaths of more than 100,000 and the number of people displaced is now estimated at more than 600,000. While the camps for locally displaced people have been closed, their problems have not been assuaged.

CULTURAL CHANGES, PARADIGM SHIFTS

What have been some of the significant changes in culture and paradigms?

Kenya has moved out of its colonialism, though it has retained some of its remnants. Independence was established in the 1960s. Its first political rulers governed under a one-party system. There appeared to be some movement towards “democracy” at the turn of the century but it lost direction in the last election. Africans are prominent on the political scene. Colonial social strata remain with a small but influential white population, an Asian group that holds the fort in business, and the emerging, affluent Africans. Economic apartheid is strong.

Western influences are affecting deeply-rooted traditional values. Kenyans remain strongly imbedded in their religious outlook: belief in God, sacredness of human life, church adher-



ence, religious practice and rites of passage. They are bonded to extended family groupings more vast and intricate than can be imagined. They identify with their ethnic groups more than with the nation.

However, winds of change are eroding these strong values. Changes come from technology. Even beggars for daily bread carry a cell phone! Many of the poor are educated. University graduates are coming from the shanty towns. Often unemployed, they are able to resort to more sophisticated crimes if they are desperate. Professional medicine offers alternatives to the diviners and herbalists, but they are beyond the means of the millions in the slums who are struggling to meet education expenses and are frequently locked out of their homes because of arrears.

The doctrines of the Christian churches confront traditional values. Long-standing practices such as polygamy are contested. How does a conscientious Christian respond to a young sister who has become a single mother when other family members ostracize her on moral grounds? What is the Christian response to the mob that murders a thief or burns someone deemed to be a witch?



Since they are multicultural, Kenyans may shift their paradigms much as linguists shift languages. Christians will resort to a diviner for answers when the medical doctors or the priests do not solve their problems. Many traditional values have merely been poured into new vessels when people have adopted Christianity or Islam. The appearance of new Christian sects based on revelations may be a ground-swell of traditional beliefs.

EDUCATION

Since independence, education in Kenya has undergone changes ranging from its systems to the subject taught. Soon after independence, enrollment increased dramatically. The primary school sector has seen the biggest evolution, especially in the rates of enrollment. In 1963, there were less than a million pupils enrolled in



schools. Today, there are more than 7.4 million pupils.

Reports, however, continue to indicate that the number of pupils sitting for the primary education surpasses the chances to enter secondary schools. Only 50 per cent are able to be absorbed in the secondary schools. The Ministry reports show that only 50 per cent complete the eight years of primary education. Thus the system is greatly compromised.

Some of the problems that affect the school system include poverty, incompetent administration, drug abuse, poor governance, regional and gender disparities, and social and cultural changes.

The government schools could not meet the influx and many children are still not attending. When pupils complete primary education, secondary schools cannot meet the demand.

CULTURAL CHANGES

In African traditions the female child was not given the same opportunities as males. Her place was seen to be in the kitchen. With the advent of education she was left to stay at home. Over the years some campaigns have born fruit. Some communities are still slow in embracing changes to cultural practices that are harmful to the child. The government has put out a children's act that clearly proclaims the right to education and condemns harmful practices like female genital mutilation and early marriages.

Many communities have come to appreciate the positive influences of education on health. With education many Kenyans have started to accept hospital medicine and procedures and the number of deaths and infant mortality have been reduced. These modern medicines are increasingly preferred to traditional medicines.

URBANIZATION

When I arrived in Nairobi in November 2006, I was struck



by the contrast between the rich and the poor. I had seen much poverty in Karachi, Pakistan, where I lived for five years, but the division between rich and poor did not appear as great despite having three times the population of Nairobi. The situation in Nairobi is well described by Alex Zanotelli, a Combonian missionary with ministry experience in Sudan and Kenya.

“I feel that Nairobi is maybe the worst city in the world,” writes Zanotelli. “From the slum of Korogocho, where I live, to the affluent estates there are only a few kilometres, but between us there is that wall that separated Lazarus (the poor) from Dives (the rich) in the parable of Jesus.

“And the tragic thing is that nobody seems to notice this: (it) is the most normal of things.”

Normal, but so obviously problematic. ■

The Fight Against AIDS

Mount Kenya East HIV / AIDS Project

BY MARIO AZRAK, OMI



Fr. Mario Azrak with AIDS orphans

This wonderful project aimed at supporting people afflicted with HIV / AIDS was born when a group of faith-filled leaders gathered to discuss issues affecting their community. In the lead-up to their meeting in 2001, people knew of AIDS but did not have a full understanding. Due to the cost associated with blood tests and the fear that the

result would be positive, members of the community did not want to be tested. There was an awful stigma associated with the disease. People who were HIV-positive were regarded as having incurred God's wrath.

Despite the reluctance of people not getting tested, national statistics released at the time nonetheless reported that the district of Meru had the highest growth of new HIV-positive cases in East Africa. Antiretroviral drugs were available but because they were

AIDS awareness for couples seminar





not subsidized by the government until 2005, few could afford them. Religious leaders from all faith communities would be called upon month after month to bury people who had died from

AIDS-related complications. After the death of one spouse the surviving partner was in most cases HIV-positive, and shortly afterward developed full-blown AIDS. This brought about the tragic phenomenon of AIDS-orphans. Elderly people who lost their children, who would otherwise have taken care of them in their old age, were left to raise their grandchildren.

In 2001, the pastors of Upper Abogetta formed a group aimed at identifying and attempting to find solutions to social problems facing the community. This group became known as the 'Pastors Fraternity of Upper Abogetta'.

In their monthly meetings, a constant issue of concern was HIV / AIDS. In an attempt to tackle this dreadful epidemic, they formed an action group to mobilize the entire community in the fight against AIDS. The chairman of the Pastors fraternity became the chairman of the AIDS Action Group. Leaders from other churches took other committee positions.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate took on the roles of overall coordination and patrons of the project. AIDS awareness seminars were held in all churches and schools. Combined prayer services were held annually to pray for and raise funds to support HIV / AIDS victims. In an attempt to overcome the stigma associated with AIDS, people who were HIV-positive were encouraged to speak publicly about how they were managing to live with it. Support groups for people living with HIV / AIDS were held in the Kionyo Youth Centre Hall every month.

In August 2007, the Meru County Council kindly allocated

a half-acre plot of public land to Mount Kenya East HIV / AIDS CBO for the purpose of building a permanent voluntary counselling and testing centre as well as a health clinic. The facility will include a medical laboratory to conduct blood tests, be equipped to dispense antiretroviral drugs, as well as having trained counsellors. The pharmacy will cater to the needs of regular patients and those who are HIV-positive.

There will be two medical wards, one of which will primarily be respite care for people suffering complications from full-blown AIDS and whose families are not able to care for them at home. The other will be for medical observation of patients from the wider community. The income generated from services to the wider public will support services given free of charge to people infected with HIV / AIDS. Any and all profits gained will assist widows and orphans who are a consequence of this epidemic.

Reflecting on the progress of the Mount Kenya East HIV / AIDS Action Group, one can see the healing hand of God working in it and through it. The Holy Spirit is actively working through the tireless volunteers who are assisting their brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they are HIV-positive, widows or orphans. ■



AIDS clinic construction



Tharima ya Murungu (Blessings of God)

BY KEN FORSTER, OMI

Joe and Joan Baehr know what it means to *seed the clouds* of goodness.

The Baehrs have supported the Mount Kenya Water Project in a very substantial way. When I approached them on a possible article about their interest and support of the project, their first reaction was: “We are not ones who want publicity.”

“I know that,” I said. “But we do need witnesses; people who believe deeply in something and are ready to sacrifice to bring it about.”

The Baehrs live a simple life, not focused on material comforts, but enjoying the gifts of the land and nature. When questioned to confirm that their generous giving didn’t jeopardize their own needs, they assured me “We always come first!” I can assure you that statement is anything but the truth.

Like other donors, Joe and Jean have worked hard for what they have, and they expect donations to be spent on the project and helping people. They bemoan, as we all do, when hundreds of thousands of dollars are wasted. “Not maybe misuse of funds, but spending money on what is not essential,” Jean said.

I appreciated Joe’s statement when he said: “You are one of the reasons we donated. You put a good chunk of your life into it and made

Joe Baehr





Jean Baehr

it come this far, so we would like to see it continue.”

For a single person, belonging to a religious institute that is not yet bankrupt, it is easier for me to live detached. I have always expected transparency in the use of donations, and expected the beneficiaries to contribute in labour as well as finances to all projects.

Sacrifice is not on one side only. The small tea farmers in Kenya will have contributed half a million Canadian dollars by the time the water project is complete. A farmer on a small farm might make \$2,000 a year.

“I have every expectation that this (the Kenya water project) is going to be complete,” I told the Baehrs. “My hope is that when we go in September 2009, we will celebrate the completion of the project.”

When I spoke of the Oblate Mission travel trip to Kenya in September, they expressed an interest to come along but know they are physically not able, as Joe is now dependent on a wheelchair.

During my first visit to their home, they indicated that water projects were dear to their hearts.

“Water is just so important,” Jean said. “It doesn’t matter whether it is in Africa, South America or here in B.C. It is absolutely essential, and when you think that people can’t even have decent drinking water, it’s ...”

“Like the situation in Zimbabwe,” I interjected, referring to reports that more than 500 people died from a cholera outbreak caused by contaminated food and water.

“The reason we actually got started,” Jean continued, “was

an article in the paper one year ... they were collecting water from condensation on suspended plastic nets ... milking clouds."

Just an article explaining how difficult it is for many in the world to enjoy what we have from a tap, was enough to stir their hearts.

Jean recollected driving through Whistler en route to Lillooet after their return from Kenya. "I was overwhelmed with the beauty of the clear 'Green River' running alongside the highway. If Kenya had one river like that in their whole country they would shout *Tharima ya Murungu* (Blessings of God)."

"You have to concentrate on one thing ... because there are so many demands," Joe said. "Every time you turn around there is someone in your pocket and they are all good causes." Those words have likely been on the lips of every donor at one time or another.

"You can't respond to everything," I replied.

"When we were in Kenya, we realized we couldn't do that," Joe explained. "We are going to focus on (some) things. In regard to child sponsorship, we didn't get into that at all. No, we are going to assist to build schools, and not one-by-one try to help families and children. There is no end. This (the water project) is what we think we can do that will have a lasting impact and that is what we are going to do."

It is true. You have to focus on something.

I have heard many times the question from my Kenyan friends, "Have you brought Christmas for me?" They mean a gift.

Truly, Joe and Jean, you and all others who sacrificed the things that you could have and enjoy, bring Christmas every day of the year. It is not just a gift, but love that flows like water.

I thank you, Joe and Jean, for preaching the Gospel to me, a priest, a missionary and an Oblate. ■

Oblate Mission travel news

Kenya Mission Travel

Ken Forster, OMI, will be leading a group of people from Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and the Yukon on an Oblate Mission trip to Kenya from Sept. 23 to Oct. 11. Included will be a 16-year-old and his mother from Hinton, AB. The Oblates in Kenya are bracing themselves for the invasion of our eager band of volunteers! Please keep them and the Oblates in your prayers as they work among the people of Kenya.

Also in the works for 2010: we hope to travel to Peru – second home to many young Canadian Oblates in the 50s and 60s – and also to Guatemala, one of the newer places our Canadian Oblates have missioned. Details are still being worked out on Peru and Guatemala. For information, please contact Neysa Finnie (604-736-3972) or nmfinnie@yahoo.com. ■

WANTED: YOUR STORIES!

There are many charities and good causes which solicit your support. Yet for some reason you have chosen to offer the Oblates your prayers, friendship and assistance.

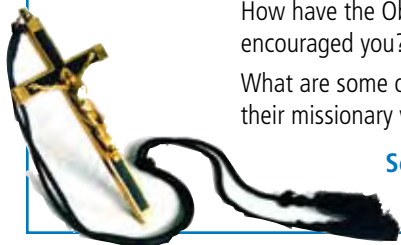
We are curious: Why did you choose us?

How did you hear about the Oblate missionary work?

How have the Oblates supported, inspired and encouraged you?

What are some of your best memories of Oblates and their missionary work?

Send your stories (and photos) to:
lacombemami@sasktel.net



Update on Meru Formation House

BY MERANKIEL FIDELE MUNKIELE, OMI

This is a year of change in our formation program in Meru.

Since we started our formation process in Kenya, our two-year program in Meru helped prepare young men for Novitiate.

Three years ago, we thought it was good to have our pre-novices in Nairobi to study philosophy before going to novitiate. This philosophy stage of formation lets us think about the program experience in Meru. After reflections and discernment, the Mission came to change the Meru Program from two years to one, considering the fact that our young men will continue their pre-novitiate while studying philosophy.

The one-year program in Meru began this year. The Meru Formation House is therefore at the stage of postulancy where





we welcome the young men into our residence in order to discern their vocation.

We started the year by welcoming eight young men for a vocational workshop. The

workshop, which focused on vocation and Oblate charism, helped provide a general insight into those who were to be selected to begin their journey with us. Before the young men came to Meru, I visited their families and parishes.

Our three new men who have signed their commitment to the program of postulancy are James Mwiti from Meru diocese, Kionyo parish; Joseph Nzioka from Machakos diocese, Misiane parish; and Victor Omanga from Kisii diocese, Nyamagua parish.

James comes from Igandene where he knew Father Harold Kaufman and other Oblates. The others hail from the central and western regions of Kenya and are between 20 and 25 years of age.

Meanwhile, a farewell celebration for our two pre-novices, Robert and Sammy, was held in Meru. They are going to South Africa for their Novitiate. Parents expressed their gratitude and support for their sons joining religious life with Oblates. A very good atmosphere was experienced during the celebration.

Shortly thereafter, Brother Joseph also renewed his vows in Meru.

We thank all those who always help us in many ways to run the formation program in Meru. May God be praised through the good work of all Oblates, Lay Associates, and our supporters. ■

Missionary Activity in Kenya

BY ALFRED GROLEAU, OMI

Many things have been happening in Kenya in the last nine months.

In the Oblate House in Karen, Nairobi, a wall has set apart the new construction site and a new building is taking shape, a dormitory for 10 students. Our present accommodations have been full to capacity with a constant change of occupants.

On Jan. 1 many of the members of our mission community stayed in Karen overnight on the way to Mombasa for our yearly retreat. All told we were 14 at the retreat, our young Kenyans included. Normand was away in Canada and Sheila remained in Karen because she was awaiting reports on Normand's health tests at that time that proved positive, fortunately. Father Benedict OSB from the Bible on the Ground retreat centre in Nanyuki preached the retreat. Time for leisure in Mombassa was included. The guest house of the Consolata

[Kionyo Parish Convent](#)



Missionaries provided a view on the open sea and exposure to a constant and comforting sea breeze. A few hundred meters away from us a luxurious tourist resort had been left empty since last year's post election violence.

On February 2nd four scholastics completed their regencies and left for Theological Studies in Cedara, South Africa. They are Ananua Dionisius, Kimau Fidelis, Muiriungi Stephen and Rimberia Gideon. Kiara Dennis has remained in Karen and has now settled into the second part of his regency. Brother Magambo Joseph continues his ministry with Father Mario and Father Daquin living in Igandene.

February 10th witnessed the departure of two candidates for novitiate, Kagane Robert and Kang'oria Sammy, thus breaching the gap of novices from Kenya since 2004. We hope that henceforth the flow may continue.

Our prenovitiate in Karen is full to capacity. Besides our seven pre-novices, we have two student priests with us, Mbheki Anthony, OMI, from South Africa studying spirituality at Tangaza College, and Faustin Litanda Bungulu, OMI, doing English courses this month at the school of the Anglican Church of Kenya. Among the pre-novices, Mwenda Zachary is alone in second year of Philosophy at the Consolata Institute. In first year there are two, Kithinji Cosmos and Kiriinya Silas. Mbae Henry, Gichana Josaphat, Amboka Robinson and Otieno Vincent have begun their orientation sessions. They are four because first- and second-year postulants from Meru were promoted together this year.

We have many reasons to be thankful to God for the gifts the OMI Mission has received in 2008 and these first months of 2009: two new members in Frs. Mahuku Didace and Litanda Faustin sent to us from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the coming home of our young Kenyan Oblates and their inspiration to us in their work and in their spirit, and the hope of aspiring Oblates who come to us seeking the Lord and a place to work in His vineyard.

We wish to express a heartfelt thanks for the support of OMI Lacombe Province and AMMI Lacombe Canada MAMI that was visible last year in the visit of Oblates Jim Fiori and Tony O'Dell and also the many renovations and new constructions that have been undertaken in 2008: renovations to the rectories in Igandene and Kionyo as well as in the formation house in Meru, new constructions in Kionyo of a convent for a community of nuns expected to assist in parish ministry, and in Karen of the above mentioned students dormitory. ■

Fund-raising for the Kenya missions

What ideas do you and your communities have to raise funds for the Kenya missions? Events within the last year have included buffet dinners, silent auctions, guest speakers, song, and even the construction of wheelbarrows.

...FROM MANITOBA

The MAMI members in Manitoba hosted their 46th annual supper in November. It was a successful gathering with 259 in attendance. The guest speaker was Bill Stang, OMI, one of the founding members of the Oblate mission in Kenya. He provided a video presentation and accounts of his adventures during his stay in Kenya. Local MAMI members donated many items for a silent auction. At the end of an enjoyable evening, \$3,700 was raised for distribution to our Oblate mission in Kenya.

...TO VANCOUVER

A similar event was held in West Vancouver last October in St. Anthony's Parish. KEN-YA HELP drew parishioners

from several parishes. After a delicious meal, guests entered the reality of the Oblate Kenyan Mission through an audio-visual presentation from Ken Forster, OMI, who has recently returned after nine years in the mission.

...TO LABRADOR

Tony O'Dell, OMI, came up with an innovative idea after his return from a visit to the Oblate missions last fall. He was struck by the primitive tools available to men who did manual labour day after day for menial compensation. With ancient sledges, chisels and wooden wheelbarrows they struggled to erect the walls of an AIDS clinic so the sick and the dying could have a place to go for treatment and comfort.

Observing the harsh conditions of life for these people, Tony came up with an idea to help raise funds for them by selling homemade wooden wheelbarrows filled with beautiful flowers, reflecting the vivid colors of Africa. Crafted by parishioners in Labrador City, Newfoundland, the wheelbarrows were stained and painted, flowers were planted in them, and these were recently offered for sale at the Basilica of our Lady of Perpetual Help. If you would like to view a video of this event, please go to: http://home.catholicweb.com/labcity-basilica/files/Wheelbarrows_for_Kenya.wmv

...TOGETHER FOR KENYA

Your ongoing support of the Oblate missions in Kenya is greatly appreciated.



The Winds of Change



It was in the early 1990s that our “affiliation” with Kenya first began. The United Nations posted a position (based in Nairobi) dealing with forest preservation, so we submitted a joint application. However, the person holding the position changed his/her mind and decided to stay. So much for that dream!

The Spirit must have a sense of humour. In 2002, we thought Ecuador might have been a good place to hang our hats. We put our Saskatoon house up for sale on a Friday, and two days later Glenn Zimmer, OMI, phoned ... not to buy the house, but to see if we might be interested in volunteer positions at the Qu’Appelle House of Prayer. The rest, as they say, is history. Our move south to warmer climes from Saskatoon was cut short by a few thousand kilometres.

Seven years later, we still call the House of Prayer our home, but another opportunity has presented itself and we once again find ourselves involved in Kenyan issues. As joint communications coordinators for AMMI Lacombe Canada MAMI, we now have a hand in developing publications such as this.

So, once again, hello Kenya. Hello, Peru, Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, India, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, and most of all, hello Canada.

It is a vast world with many beautiful stories to be told. We hope, in our small way, that we can help relay some of these in future publications. Heaven knows, we may still make it to Kenya!

John and Emily Cherneski

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