

Report on Faith2Share Leadership consultation “Mission and Suffering”, 20th – 23rd November 2015, Goma, DR Congo.

Background:

The so-called “Great Lakes” region of Africa consists of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and one of the largest countries on the continent – DR Congo. All four countries have endured immense hardships during colonial times and arguably, even more after obtaining independence from Western powers – including tribal and civil wars, genocides, war crimes and political instability. One such example is Burundi, which is, despite being 95% Christian, still one of the poorest countries globally with a volatile political situation, forcing many people to flee their homes and become refugees. After Timothy Mazimpaka (himself a Rwandan refugee who had to escape to Nairobi) was appointed Faith2Share’s Regional Coordinator in November 2014, he began discussing and planning with church and mission leaders in the region whether Faith2Share could make a positive impact in the region and what this would look like. The plan was made to organise a meeting in Goma, DRC, in November 2015 and fulfil the following three aims: 1) To build fellowship between mission movements and churches in Great Lakes region (and also bring participants from East Africa); 2) To pursue together what it means to do mission in the midst of suffering; 3) To pray and explore what Faith2Share could contribute in the region. For Faith2Share it really was a “leap of faith” as we do not have any formal members in the region, with the nearest member agencies based in Kenya and Ethiopia.

Participants:



A total of 34 people had expressed their desire to be part of this consultation from different parts of DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Central African Republic. However, obtaining a visa to visit DR Congo and challenging travel arrangements meant that only 21 people attended from Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and DR Congo itself. A few days before he was due to travel for the consultation, Timothy Mazimpaka fell ill and was not allowed to travel. Instead, Anton

Ponomarev from Faith2Share office in Oxford, UK, had to step in and work with the local Congolese hosts to facilitate the programme and most travel arrangements.

Programme:

The programme was due to start on Friday afternoon 20th November but the team travelling to Goma overland from Kigali was severely delayed by a road accident and was not able to cross into DR Congo until the next morning. As a result, the programme had to be modified from its original shape and only took place on Saturday and part of Sunday as most people had to leave on early Monday morning. Some participants therefore felt that the programme was rather short as they wanted to spend longer together studying and discussing things. Also due to the shortage of electricity in Goma, the programme had to finish by 18:30 each night.

The formal welcome was offered by Bishop Sylvestre Bahati Bali-Basane, Bishop of Bukavu, and Rev Desire Mukanirwe from the Anglican Church of Congo.

Harrison Mungai from Kenya started the programme with a Bible Study based on Hebrews chapter 11, focussing on the connection between faith and suffering and providing a very good Biblical framework for the rest of the consultation programme.

Dr Susan Kiragu from Kenya, co-founder of Children in Freedom, did the first session on “Mission in a Context of Suffering: An Historical and Socio-Political perspective”. Susan started by telling her own story of how she went to Cambridge to do her PhD in education, got married there but then she and her husband decided to leave their jobs and move back to Kenya in 2013. Without any outside funding, they started working with 7 children, and now they are helping almost 50 children. Their work is not just helping children getting back to school, but they also provide mentoring to vulnerable children to build their own sense of self-worth.



Susan’s session then expanded into the subject of self-confidence and self-esteem in the context of



Africa which is so evident not just in the many challenges that the continent faces, but also the lack of ability and self-awareness to tackle the many problems, when so many local people still rely heavily on outside assistance. Rather than dwelling too much on this issue of dependency on foreign aid, Dr Susan instead brought forward historical evidence, showing how developed Africa once was in terms of resources, advanced architecture, science and medicine, especially in places like Mali, Axum in Ethiopia or Alexandria in Egypt. In fact, those civilisations were more

developed than Europe was in those days, and held more resources and technical expertise.

Following on from Dr Susan, Professor Kahwa Njojo from the Anglican University of Congo in Bunia, brought a theological perspective on Mission in the context of Suffering, especially what the Scriptures teach us about suffering and what suffering means for church and mission. Prof Kahwa

started by reminding us that God did not prevent His own Son from suffering (and we observe the same in the lives of John the Baptist, Paul and Peter). Suffering is part of being a Christian, but it doesn't rob us of joy, it brings us restoration, making us firm and strong. Talking about suffering and Christian faith in Congo, Prof Kahwa still urged us to glorify Jesus with thanksgiving amidst all the pain. What the church's response should be to this issue of suffering: 1) identify the needs of suffering people (like those who were displaced in 1996 civil war in DRC); 2) be strong in her prophetic mission; 3) preach and act the Gospel of liberation (including social engagement); 4) bring holistic Gospel to people.

As in any Faith2Share consultation, we tried to give enough time for people to share their own experiences of mission engagement or what it means to do mission in this suffering region. We heard from Harrison Mungai from Kenya whose organisation iServe Africa recruits and sends out young Kenyan Christians to do practical mission outreach in Kenya and neighbouring countries. Bishop Sylvain Katarama from Bukavu shared about their work with those women who were raped during the civil conflict and how they built a house of prayer and ministry where they show forgiveness to others even when faced with immense suffering themselves. As a result of this, they saw people of other faiths become Christians. Donatien Ndagijimana from Burundi shared about the ministry of Harvest for Christ, which reaches out to local communities in all provinces of Burundi, including Pygmy tribes. Right now one of the toughest challenges for them is the political crisis and instability in the country and one solution was to gather many churches and organisations to advocate for peace under the umbrella of Christian Initiatives for Peace. Bisoke Balikenga shared about his work with Congolese young people, especially in the area of peace and reconciliation. 155 orphans were trained to finish school and start the college and there is also literacy work done among the pygmies.



The next morning all participants were divided into 5 groups and went to a variety of local churches in Goma to experience local church life and worship in Anglican, Pentecostal and Methodist traditions. As Congolese people say: "If you love me, you will visit me in my home" – and it was a truly wonderful experience to worship together with local people.

In the afternoon when the whole group got back, people were divided into groups of 4 and were asked to reflect on what they have learnt from the programme (not just the sessions, but also through informal interactions, conversations and visits to see

how local Christians live and worship.) The record of the Group work in found is Appendix 1 on page 6.

The last input session was done by Anton Ponomarev (through translation into Swahili) and it brought a global perspective on the issue of suffering, especially on current situations of religious persecution, martyrdom and mission in this context, based on experiences of Faith2Share members and partners.

Our last hour of time together was designed so that participants could reflect of what expectations they had before coming to the event and whether their expectations were met. These are some of the quotes from the people:

“Everyone says that Congo is the worst place to visit – but Faith2Share came! Please don’t stop now, keep coming!”

“The consultation was helpful from beginning to end”

“My expectations were 90% met – most people from Great Lakes countries came and shared about their own suffering for mission that they are going through. We were able to share our problems and intentionally pray for one another; fellowship was developed”

“As Africans, we tend to blame white people for our problems and we don’t see that we also have responsibilities. Question for me is ‘where is our mission which our responsibility’. Let’s do small things that matter.”

“As we learn things together, I want to see how our common faith in Christ helps evangelise the world”.

Budget and Funding

The consultation cost came to \$3,090 (or GBP equivalent of £2,092) of which the participants contributed \$490 (or 16% of costs) and Faith2Share paid for remaining \$2,600. Travelling to Goma even from other parts of DR Congo is very expensive as it can only be done by air or boat due to bad and insecure roads and Faith2Share’s expenditure on travel bursaries came to the total of \$4,977 (or equivalent in GBP £3,370)

We are grateful to Kenya Church Association for the grant of £400 which was used to help with the travel costs of 4 Kenyan participants from Nairobi to Goma.

Conclusion.

The Great Lakes region countries have a great potential in resources, strong and vibrant Christian population but at the same time some of them (DR Congo and Burundi for example) are continuing to see immense suffering and a very fragile political context. Having a Faith2Share event in one of the most challenging countries in the region despite many difficulties was a great encouragement in itself for many local participants as Faith2Share has managed to bring people together, build fellowship and sow seeds for future work in the region. We really missed Timothy Mazimpaka at the event as he will be very much part of any follow-up to this event. Faith2Share brought together not only people from different church traditions (Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostals etc) but also people from countries that have been regarded as worst enemies for many years (for example, Rwanda and DR Congo). This sense of coming together, sharing and praying for one another was as important as the context of plenary sessions: in the words of one participant: “If we have unity, we are able to be ourselves”.

Anton Ponomarev

30 November 2015



Appendix 1

Group Work – “What have you learnt from the programme?”

- 1) Stephen Mosheni (Kenya): Good time to meet but too short. Hebrews 11 (Bible Study) had added spiritual value, Prof Kahwa did a very good session; strength to love God, we are *not* alone. Dr Susan gave new knowledge we can share with others. Value as African Christian (West learnt so much from us). Question of unity, working together is key. Helpful to learn from different places. Time for talking together about God. We are not yet in heaven – we have work to do. Luke 2:52, Matthew 6 – Lord’s Prayer. Not only time to preach, but also do practical good.
- 2) Dieudonne Mugongo (DR Congo): in our region we have this issue of bad leadership; death and sickness are common, etc. How can we overcome this? The Bible has the answer – we need to pray and fast. Churches should have renewed leadership.
- 3) Bishop Sylvain Katarama: group for DRC, Rwanda & Burundi: good programme, we need to change our mentality. Dr Susan’s session was appreciated, the impact of colonialism and evil it has brought. We suffer because of it. Suffering is part of life of a Christian. If we have faith, we must have suffering. Suffering because of Jesus is inevitable. Not enough time – programme could have been longer.
- 4) Donatien Ndagijimana (Burundi): we learnt that Africa is suffering (rape, civil war, bad politics). Susan’s session on education as mentoring was appreciated. Prof Kahwa’s session gave us the Biblical basis of understanding suffering. Churches and Christians are still doing things, looking after the weak. Christians need to change things – like our management of time, sense of responsibility. To pray and to work. We need to do small but smart. Out of suffering we have things to share with others.

