

## John Beckett recalls his experience of joining a team to deliver two “Rooted in Jesus” conferences in Lusaka Diocese in April 2010

*John travelled to Lusaka with Martin Cavender, Kevin Roberts, Lucy Mugwanja and Amy Gorman. At the 4 day conferences each church congregation sent between 2 and 5 people who were involved in lay leadership in some way. Altogether, around 150 people were commissioned to lead small discipleship groups in local churches.*

**Going to Zambia was simply a great adventure.** At a very basic level, it was an adventure because I had not been on a plane for 20 years, and even then I had only flown to Paris. This was my first trip beyond Europe, my first trip to Africa.

It had been suggested that a look at African churches would provide a good contrast for my theological and personal exploration of the work of the Holy Spirit in ‘renewal’ as part of my sabbatical leave. I had been thrilled by Alison Morgan’s ‘The Wild Gospel’, and blessed before by Martin Cavender’s ministry, so when the offer to go to Lusaka Diocese came, I said ‘yes’ straight away. I’m never quite sure why I agreed to go so readily.

I’m anxious about flying. It’s bad for the environment anyway. I’d miss my family. I don’t like the heat. I hate creepy crawlies. I was nervous of how I would change coming face to face with the inevitable poverty. Added to which, as I confessed to the team before we left, I was feeling very weary in my work at present. Would I be like a piece of useless baggage?

I even began to wonder why we were going at all. What arrogance to think that we could teach Zambians about discipleship! If the African church was as vibrant as I had heard, would not God have provided Zambian teachers already?

Hence my journal entry on our first evening... “v. hot and sticky. Why am I here? Why are we here? Why not just leave Africa to sort itself out??”

In His grace and patience and gentleness, the Lord gave my answers to each of these important questions.

People who have been to Africa before will not be surprised to hear that the experience has changed me. On my return I now understand why Richard Dowden says this: “Westerners arriving in Africa...often find themselves suddenly cracked open. They lose inhibitions, feel more alive, more themselves, and they begin to understand why, until the, they have only half lived. In Africa the essentials of existence - light, earth, water, food, birth, family, love, sickness, death - are more immediate, more intense.”<sup>1</sup>

I was there to learn, I knew that. And I did I learn from these quietly spoken, courteous, immaculately dressed but very poor Zambians. I learned about being thankful for all I am given; about being hospitable; about caring in a family, about forbearance. I learned about passionate prayer and a simple dependence on God in all things. I learned to be thankful for His daily provision and about the reality of the spiritual battle that we are engaged in.

God had also sent *us* to Zambia to discover how to work as a team. The five of us discovered first hand what we knew in theory - that God had given each person different gifts and that as we learned to work together, the team itself became a microcosm of the Body of Christ. We had never met as a team before – 4 of us coming from right across the UK, and Lucy from Kenya. But God, in His grace, enabled us to work well together from the start. We encouraged and supported one another. We prayed for help, for healing and for protection (Ephesians 6 was especially important). And we laughed a lot – we needed to given the basic living conditions and accompanying insect life in Mapanza! (including Cyril, the resident cockroach in the kettle!). And in what might sound arrogant,



<sup>1</sup> “Africa - altered states, ordinary miracles”, by Richard Dowden, Portobello Books 2008 page 1,2

but was lived out and felt most humbly, our team grew in confidence of our calling and gifting and equipping by the Spirit of God *to become like Christ ministering to His people.*

I have a vivid memory of the end of a joyful worshipful Holy Communion service in Mapanza school chapel toward the end of the Rooted in Jesus conference. Prayer ministry was offered at the end. Many people queued up for prayer for healing. Others stood around outside waiting to see what would happen as Jesus began to set some people free.



We affirmed the faith that we saw in God's people, and delighted in that. We reminded them of the truth and wisdom within God's word - that each one was special to God; that Jesus was here to share and carry our burdens. We taught about the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. We reminded them of God's vision for the local church. We encouraged their calling as leaders. We challenged their discipleship. Emboldened by the prophetic use of scripture and words of knowledge from the home intercessor team, and from our own team, we invited people to repentance about negative attitudes to women and towards other Christian church denominations, and about sexual immorality.

We saw Jesus release Ronald, Aline and Catherine from the bondage of evil spirits. He brought healing among others to Annie (who is no longer 'disconnected') and to the choirmaster Remy's hearing. And in all of this, as team and delegates began to live in the power of the Spirit, in honour of Jesus, God brought us His refreshing, His empowering and a renewed sense of calling and joy.

I now knew why God had sent me to Zambia. I learned, we learned, the joy of walking obediently with the Lord, in step with the Spirit. And I learned, we learned, from a faithful people who wanted more from God, and who were only too happy to receive.

The Zambians who had so little materially were always eager to receive more of anything, materially and spiritually. Not that this was always easy to make sense of. There were a number of 'human' and cultural issues going on too that it would be dishonest not to acknowledge.

There were sobering reminders of how avarice or desperation (I was never sure which) can accompany poverty as we witnessed the eager grabbing of freebie biros, pads of paper or even food at lunchtime and loo rolls!

But, in particular I was reminded of the way in which knowledge is deemed to give power. Presumably knowledge and training are an obvious way out of poverty? Teachers and well educated people are clearly revered. It was quite shocking to see the instinctive and mechanical way in which the delegates wrote down notes as we spoke. There was great pride when certificates of attendance were received at the end of the course. Given that everyone on the team had had a better education than anyone else there (including the Zambian clergy) we were very aware that we had to ensure we were simply appealing to God's truth in the gospel alone. Add to that to our obvious relative wealth and white skin, the fact that two of us were priests, and one was even more aware of the precarious task we had been given. So it was a great blessing for us to be a team of lay and ordained, men and women, and for one of the women to be black!

I am sure we were blind to all sorts of other cultural issues, but at the end it really felt that we could echo St Paul in Thessalonians when he said: "and we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men and women, but as it actually is the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."<sup>2</sup>

For we did see God's people renewed in their faith. We saw a people who could not mask their delight in receiving His word anew for themselves, and were so excited that they now had a tool in the Rooted in Jesus Course with which to share God's Word with their neighbours. Indeed, I had not expected to see how important Rooted in Jesus would be to them.



We have such an abundance of written teaching materials in the UK; an

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<sup>2</sup> 1Thessalonians 2:13

abundance of bibles; an abundance of education. The world-wide-web makes it even more available to us, and we take it for granted that we are able to read! Most Zambians have none of this. Books and written materials about anything are few and far between in the shops, let alone in poor farmers' homes. It's true that most of the delegates had bibles, but not all, and some were extremely battered. And from the struggles that they had when asked to read aloud in small group settings (despite wonderfully encouraging help from more literate brother and sister Christians) one wonders how much they can or do read them. So to have a written course in their local language, that does not rely on everyone being able to read was a wonderful thing.

It was also striking to see how much delight the delegates gained from running the Rooted in Jesus small group sessions themselves. In Lusaka in particular, many did meet in groups to discuss the Sunday morning sermon in Mothers Union, St Veronicas Guild<sup>3</sup> or Men's Fellowship. However, the much smaller Rooted in Jesus group setting enabled a much better exploration of how the gospel might affect the way they lived in.

A gentle lady called Daisy was telling me of her long journey to get to and from the Lusaka conference. She explained how her 11 year old daughter was at home looking after her 4 year old child, and of all the domestic tasks that awaited her when she arrived back home later. I asked her, "has it been worth your while coming?" "Oh, yes", she earnestly replied, "I've learned how to read my bible, and how it can change the way I live".



Perhaps my favourite story of all is of the farmer who asked his friends to pray for him to be healed of a longstanding painful chest following a cow kick. Not only did God heal him instantly, but he told us that he had been a Christian for 15 years, but that before this conference, he had never before known the wonderful sense of being in God's presence. It was so good, that were his wife to walk in now and invite him to come to bed with her, he would refuse and say I would rather stay here with God!

But, what of my final question? Why us and not Zambian Christians doing this work? I believe God wanted us there so that the Zambian church to learn from us too. A visitor from outside will often offer a valuable perspective of what God is doing among you. But we were also able to share some of our theological education, and we could teach from experience about small group ministry. We enabled them to realise that they could simply pray for one another without waiting for the priest to do it. And, wonderfully, because it happened without our knowing it, the team itself was able to model something new for the relatively patriarchal Zambian culture about working and serving together. About how men and women can honour one another, as I understand the New Testament calls us to do, and that in so doing we might even have offered a glimpse of the mutuality of the Trinity itself.

I have been occupied since my return with wondering about why was this such a renewing experience for us as a team, and for the delegates? Why did we leave with such enthusiasm for sharing God's word and such a determination to live differently? And how can we continue to assist in this renewing work of God in our own lives and in the churches we minister to, so that God's kingdom comes more fully to our communities too.

But for now, I thank God not just for the Rooted in Jesus course, which seems set to become a wonderful tool for Christ's church in Africa; but I also thank God for the way the RiJn conference has been written, and for the way God used these conferences to encourage and renew the leadership of his church in Zambia, and in England and Kenya!

All in all, what an adventure! It has been a fantastic example of God's lavish and un-earnable graciousness. Of the unpredictability and wonder of the renewing Spirit of God. As with all of the good things in this life, it has been great to joyfully receive them, to be very thankful, and give Him the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.



*Photos by John Beckett and Martin Cavender*

*Rooted in Jesus is directed by Alison Morgan and published by ReSource.*

*For more information see [www.rootedinjesus.net](http://www.rootedinjesus.net).*

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<sup>3</sup> St Veronica's Guild began as a nurture group especially for younger single mothers, but now appears to function as a more inclusive and a similar group to the Mother's Union. Both undertake great kingdom work among poor and sick people.