



SOMETHING DIFFERENT, SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT

HELEN VAN KOEVERING TELLS OF HOW WAR-TORN MOZAMBIQUE IS BEING TRANSFORMED BY THOSE PASSIONATELY FOLLOWING GOD

Our veranda has one of the best views ever: rural African forest stretching down to Lake Malawi, sweeping past small villages where children's voices reach upwards from where they wash and fill their buckets to carry home on their heads. We're in that time again of dry land, red dust, gusts of warm wind and rising humidity. We wait for the rains with the people who still hold the wisdom of generations that depend on this seasonal rain. This creates a time for action – for patching thatches, finishing building and preparing fields. Our veranda is a place for us to sit during this time, to be reminded, share plans and reflect with visitors.

God is doing something different in northern Mozambique. Having arrived in the late 1980s, when war was pouring death and destabilisation on the new nation, and having worked in community development after peace came in 1992, I remember how it used to be. My husband Mark and I met and married here, began our family here and left to take on theological studies in 1997. With Mark's election as Bishop we returned to Niassa in 2003, daring to believe the promise of Isaiah 58 that the old waste places and foundations of generations would be rebuilt.

And the promise has been kept, quite literally and very significantly. The number of churches has doubled to around 405 with around 63,000 members; eight clinics have been renovated or built on the lakeshore and service around 20,000 people; a mission school has been extended, with two new schools built, and where there were 21 priests, there are now 52. All in a country which the United Nations counts as one of the poorest in the world.

Visitors have noticed our Vida mission teams and our multiplying ministry approach are two very different ways of doing church. Voluntary mission teams in half our congregations work to bring healthcare, basic training and compassion in the name of Jesus, caring for around 10,000 orphans in their own communities. Meanwhile, training seven community priests means we can now reach more people than ever in our diocese. The diocese has partnered in business and as advocates with forestry companies to plant 15,000 trees on formerly degraded land. Like that new growth, some who have visited have said our church is ‘affecting the fabric of society’ and ‘developing half of Mozambique’. Praise God for that!

The vitality of God’s word

There have been many significant things which have been part of this difference. Our church is reading the Bible differently. Mozambicans take the Bible seriously, and the metaphors and imagery resonate with rural Africa. When reading the letters to the churches in Revelation recently with community priests, I saw how intensely real and personal those letters were.

With high levels of illiteracy and insufficient Bibles, a study method similar to the *lectio divino* was implemented early on – a method which required only one Bible and one reader in each group. This led to us using the *Rooted in Jesus* resource, which has led to confidence in the movement of the Spirit leading to some significant growth in the Church. I know well the difficult, hard steps forward and the many painful steps we have taken backwards, but above all I know that God is with and for the wounded and broken, and Mozambicans remind us of that time and time again.

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Significant relationships have also been built over these years. In 1992 a reporter from *Time* magazine wrote this of Lichinga, the capital of Niassa Province: ‘It’s not the end of the world, but you can see it from here’. The Diocese of Niassa, hurt by 30 years of war, increasing poverty and isolation, now has true friends bridging the differences of the Anglican Communion. We have links around the world and feel our support is stronger than ever – we have wonderful links with churches in neighbouring Malawi and Tanzania, and our Companion Link with the Diocese of London is truly life-sharing. We also have active links with the Church in Malaysia, Australia, Wales, Singapore and the USA, and when visitors come here they see our poverty but also share our life, learn with us and recognise the impact of God’s ministry here.

The hospitality of the poorest has been blessed abundantly. I once interrupted a question from a visitor who asked an abandoned Mozambican woman, evicted from her one-room mud hut with three children, “What does God mean to you?”

I simply told her: “You are here”. The mother knew that God’s hope was in that moment, that visit, that day. Her perspective, as one of the world’s poorest speaking to one from among the world’s wealthiest, matters. She presents a picture of hope in our hurting, broken, wounded world which more than ever needs the wholeness of God’s love and life.

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The most significant change has been in the growth of hope that the poorest now find in their churches. The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams called this ‘Holy Communion in action’ when he visited Malawi last year. Hope and action has led to many more churches in remote communities seeing their worship change – more freedom, more joy, more singing and more dancing!

At a clergy retreat in 2011 a team from Singapore spoke of renouncing the sins of past generations and of spiritual forces that are real; our priests celebrated this freedom and welcomed this healing as they would fresh rainfall after a drought.



Seventy year old Padre Msossa, from one of our lakeshore villages, has found new life in Christ in the last few years. A witchdoctor in Mecuburi’s outlying villages has responded to a repeated dream from God and turned to Jesus, putting down his former craft. As a result, freeing life has come to not only his family but his whole village. Priests around the Diocese have been spontaneously forming healing teams and holding healing services, with prayer for healing in the largest possible sense – for community relationships, for the land, the spiritual health and for individuals. The local priests are leading the way, and there are continual signs of deep, joy-filled hope and loving, freeing service in the Church.

The repeated message heard around the Diocese today is this: God is with us – after all, for all and through all!



Helen van Koeving

Helen and her husband Mark live in Lichinga, the capital of the northern province of Niassa, where Mark has been bishop since 2003.