

November 8, 2010

[Visit \*Leading from the Heart\* Blog](#)

Dear Friends,

**“And a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6) A joke? Hardly.** Last Wednesday morning our Grand Rapids District mission team attended worship at Africa University (AU) in Old Mutare, Zimbabwe. The service, led entirely by children from the Fairfield Home orphanage at the Old Mutare United Methodist Mission, included drama, poetry, and an incredible choir of children who danced, smiled, laughed, swayed, clapped, and sang their hearts out because of their love for Jesus.

When it came time for the sermon, I was astounded to see a 12 year boy named Gift Tonderai come to the pulpit to preach. Using Joshua 6 (the battle of Jericho) as his text and speaking without a note in front of him, Gift powerfully challenged us to treat the obstacles in our lives as the walls that surrounded Jericho. We need to march around those walls every morning, make noise, shout, sing, practice patience, and pray unceasingly to God until the walls come a tumbling down. **“It’s just a wall,” Gift kept repeating.** It does preach, doesn’t it?

- Having trouble at school? ***It’s just a wall.***
- Lose your job? ***It’s just a wall.***
- Living in an orphanage? ***It’s just a wall.***
- Experiencing difficulties in a relationship? ***It’s just a wall.***
- Confused as you discern God’s call in your life? ***It’s just a wall.***

**12 years old!** The congregation of several hundred students and faculty was profoundly touched. The Holy Spirit moved in this young man in a way that was both transformative and prophetic.

Gift had no way of knowing this, but his sermon became a key turning point in the discussions that our mission team and university officials had the previous two days regarding the building of a retreat center on campus. For the past 20 months a task force from the Grand Rapids District has been working on a major initiative at Africa University, the first phase of which is the retreat center. We’ve encountered major obstacles along the way, including a depressed U.S. economy, the decision to temporarily halt the project in order to support Haiti earthquake relief, the unsettling effect of the change from the zim to the dollar in Zimbabwe, and significant communication challenges with AU as we planned our mission trip. Every time we faced a roadblock, we felt God calling us to persevere and reminding us, ***“It’s just a wall.”***

During our first face to face meeting with university officials on Monday, Nov. 1, Vice-Chancellor Fanuel Tagwira, who serves as the chief executive officer at AU, said to us, *“Unless the Lord builds the house, we build in vain. We believe that God has sent the Grand Rapids District of the West Michigan Conference to us for such a time as this. For years we have dreamed of a retreat center at AU, a place where we can host mission teams, visiting scholars, conferences, those desiring a place for spiritual retreat, and United Methodists from around the world who simply want to visit us and experience the way God is using AU to transform the continent of Africa.”*

AU mission team leader Ed Edwardson responded to the Vice-Chancellor by saying that in the beginning we had no idea that God was calling us to initiate a project that was already an expressed need and dream of university officials. He also stated our conviction that the retreat center can serve as a means of telling the story of AU and enabling more United Methodists to visit this amazing place. The Holy Spirit was moving in a mighty way as we envisioned the possibilities, looked at a potential site, discussed changes to the proposed floor plan, and decided to consult with a local contractor to ascertain a more reliable cost estimate. **When we left everyone was pumped!** What a difference it makes when we can actually sit at table face to face to make such important decisions.

Reality set in on Tuesday as the contractor presented us with a rough cost for the project that far exceeded our target of \$350,000. In addition, he reminded us that the proposed site,

which has a gorgeous view of Hartzell Mountain and the Old Mutare UM Mission, would entail significant extra cost because the retreat center would be built into a slope. The euphoria of our initial meeting gave way to uncertainty. **Someone tell me: it's just a wall, right?**

Our team met that evening to pray and make some serious decisions about how to proceed. Each one of us felt strongly that God was still calling us to build the retreat center, but we also knew that we could not raise the kind of money the contractor was talking about. It was a restless night for me, and on my early morning run, I formulated some thoughts in preparation for our last joint meeting on Wednesday.

Using Hebrews 12:1, "*Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,*" I planned to share with university officials that despite our discouragement yesterday, we believe that together we can find a way to move forward. We are convinced that the Christ-centered education that AU provides to 1,200 students from 28 countries is both an act of justice and the key to changing the African continent. Although our team has already been greatly challenged in this project, we are grateful for the strength and vision that God gives us to face obstacles with courage and don't intend to give up. I would conclude by saying, "Our team believes that when 2 or 3 are gathered together, God is with us as we do this hard work. So let us run the race, lift our drooping hands, strengthen our weak knees, and move forward." (Heb. 12:12)

- When we see a river, let's build a bridge and cross it.
- When we see a wall, let's tear it down.
- When we see a hole, let's jump over it or fill it in.
- When we see a mountain, let's scale it.
- When we experience darkness, let's become the light of Christ.
- When we can't find our way, let's hold hands and keep on going.

**If our mission team and university officials had any doubts about how God works in this world, they were dispelled during worship when a 12 year boy repeated the exact same themes in his sermon that I was prepared to share at our meeting.** Our team glanced at each other with knowing looks. They got it. And when we gathered with university officials later Wednesday morning, it was clear that they got it, too. The chaplain's prayer and the opening remarks of the Vice-Chancellor Tagwira both reflected their belief that God had used Gift to encourage us to trust the process.

At this final meeting before returning to Michigan, we achieved consensus to move forward vigorously and confidently. We will scale back the project to no more than \$500,000, which is what the AU Mission Team believes it can raise on behalf of the West Michigan Conference. That may mean building the retreat center in phases. AU will determine the most appropriate site, refine a floor plan, and secure more detailed cost estimates. Future meetings will likely be by teleconference. **It's just a wall.**

Our mission team arrived back home last Friday filled with joy and anticipation for what lies ahead. We also returned wiser in the ways of God.

- We learned that building relationships, especially cross culturally, happens best when we sit at table together, listen carefully, seek to understand differences, and discern God's will as the body of Christ.
- We learned that nothing worthwhile happens in life without challenges, and if the way is too easy, perhaps that is not what God is calling us to.
- We learned that patience, persistence, trust, and clear and honest communication open doors.
- We learned that God uses the most unlikely people to change the world, like Rahab the prostitute in Joshua 6, and a 12 year old orphan named Gift Tongerei in Zimbabwe.
- We learned that walls are just walls and that with God's help, there is always a way over, around, or through them.

**And what about our young preacher? Is it any coincidence that his name is Gift?**  
Gift says that he wants to be a pastor. I wonder if Bishop Keaton can find a place for him in the Grand Rapids District next year. I'll volunteer to be his assistant! ***It's just a wall!***  
Blessings, Laurie

***"We are continually faced with great opportunities,  
which are brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems."***

Margaret Mead