



What it's like living in the village

Steve Vinton, May 9, 2007

I've been in America now for a little over three weeks. The hardest question I get asked is to describe for people what it's like to live in a village in Tanzania. I really never know how exactly to answer them.

I just got this email from Sarah Bickel. I'm going to keep a copy of it on me. The next time a person who is thinking about maybe coming one day to serve with us asks me what it's like to live in a village in Tanzania, well, I'm just going to give them Sarah's email. And then we'll sit down and have a really long conversation.

So if you've ever wondered really what it would be really like to live in a little village in Tanzania, read on ...

Hi all,

I regret that I have written so infrequently and have introduced you to so few of my friends here. But this past week has been so full and moving that I can't not share at least a little of it with you.

First I want to give you a little background. When I lived in Igoda village last year, I lived in one of the wealthiest areas where the contrasts were stark... Widows with their under-nourished children and roofs falling in on them sandwiched in between government officials with their solar panels and generators and VCR's. So, I got to know and love them all on my way coming and going from school. One of my closest friends was always Mama Eliza, a widow and the mother of our dear student, Eliza. Just after I moved here, Mama Eliza was struck with the death of her youngest child and the news that she was also HIV-positive. Instead of sending her spiraling into hopelessness as it has so many others, she became stronger and drew closer to God through her trials. She became a Christian and started attending a local church. She became a strong advocate for her keeping her very "at-risk" daughter in school. She started helping other widows in her neighborhood. As she started on the anti-retrovirals for HIV and her other med's for TB, she gained strength and I even saw her back working on her farm again.

It was truly a miracle to watch this tiny widow who had lost and gained so much reaching out to share in transforming others' lives. She became a quiet, but very powerful force in her neighborhood and beyond.

Mama Yonah told me they sat together all day Wednesday during the pouring rain making baskets and talking and laughing. Mama Diwani said she went to visit her Thursday night and she noticed nothing amiss with her sweet generous self. But early Friday morning we received the news that Mama Eliza had passed away in the night. We may never know what it was that killed her so quickly and painlessly. But we do know that she touched many, many lives while here on earth and that she is resting with Jesus now. I feel so privileged to have known her and so inspired by the genuine, loving faith that she lived. God says that religion that he accepts as pure and faultless is helping orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). And if our wonderful Mama Eliza could live such love while she herself was poor, sick, widowed and had lost a child, then what hope that gives me for the rest of us in good health and with roofs over our heads!

We loved Mama Eliza deeply and will never forget her. But I also hope I will never forget the love I have seen embodied in her... and dozens of others that I have seen living up to their calling as followers of Christ and

loving in the face of disaster and despair. Just today I learned that Sangret, a farmer and neighbor of ours in the village of Igoda, gave his own personal hoe (the livelihood of any self-respecting farmer!) to a widow and mother of 6 whose only hoe had been stolen.

And the more involved I become in the lives of people all around me who have been affected by HIV/AIDS, the more I realize just what an important thing we are doing here... and how integral education is in any plan for HIV prevention. All kids deserve an education. And by making it available to even the poorest of the poor who live in the remotest of villages, we are giving kids hope and another option for their lives than just repeating the same cycle of poverty and oppression that has played itself out for generations now.

I remember my little neighbor Zacharia who is repeating first grade for the third time this year because of his habit of consistently running away from school. His mother (another sick and widowed mother of seven) would walk him all the way to his desk and sit him down with pen and exercise book only to hear from his teachers later that he had skipped out as soon as her back was turned. No amount of threatening or cajoling or even beating helped. Mom was at her wits' end and his teachers had given up hope. Then one day when I went to visit, I noticed his school uniform and his sister Leni's. They were in tatters and Jackline didn't have a stitch of a uniform. The teachers only let them come because they knew the family's situation. So, at \$3.50 each, I figured I could spring for a family's worth of school uniforms and went to talk to the village seamstress. Two weeks later his mom gave us a huge gift of sweet potatoes and an entire stalk of bananas and told me Zacharia hadn't missed a day of school since he got his new uniform.

I felt like crying. A \$3.50 uniform was all it took to give Zacharia the dignity he needed to face his classmates... and may be the first step to keeping another very at-risk kid in school and giving him the hope to keep fighting for a better future for himself and his family and his country. Life here can be raw and it can be painful. But it is full of more joy and love than I would ever have thought possible.