

My husband, Pastor Ray, has been on five mission trips to Kenya, so when he asked me to join him this summer, I had to make a confession: "I'm prejudiced against missionaries."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well I don't really know any missionaries, but the idea seems so arrogant--going to the other side of the planet to impose their "superior" culture on Third World peoples."

"It's not like that," he said..

"Then why do missionaries go? And what would be my purpose?"

"You can go with me to Kenya to find out what mission is all about, he said. "To see the work that I do. To support me." He was very reassuring. "Have faith in the Lord. Everyone who has gone with me to Africa has been transformed. We can find plenty of work for you, and the trip will change your life."

Of course he was right. Africa is shocking—both beautiful and ugly, and the trip was filled with some of the most extraordinary people I have ever met. Our church's mission work in Kenya revolves around two groups of orphans, a total of about 150 children, ranging in age from 6 to 18. RBCPC supports all of them financially, and in the past year sent Jill Weller to live and work with them. Jill is a very courageous woman, filled with love, joy and confidence in the Lord. When she and Ray get together, there's no end to the laughter.

Jill drove us across the Equator to visit the Elma Barnett Children's center in Eldama Ravine, a little town north of Nairobi. We stayed at a lovely place called "Sunrise Acres," where for a modest fee Roy and Helen (Barnett) Stover offer their hospitality to missionaries and their families for a little R & R. "Sunrise Acres" looks like England, with grass, trees and flowers and little cabins with (thank goodness) electricity and hot water. Helen and her sister Pat were born and raised in Kenya as the Barnetts were one of the original missionary families in this part of Africa. Roy is the pastor of the Eldama Ravine Presbyterian Church. He's a powerful intellectual, a principled and forceful man of God who is determined to protect and raise the orphans to become strong Christian men and women who will be a blessing to Kenya and not a burden.

Ray and Jill did give me several "assignments" on this trip, and the first one was to meet with the Eldama Ravine chapter of "Moms In Touch," an international organization of women who support and pray for their families, especially children in school. We met thirty women who spoke good English and were intelligent, thoughtful, and beautifully dressed. Ray led the group in a Bible study and then I shared some photos of our children and grandchildren, which immediately prompted the question, "How do you get along with your daughters in law?" As I shared my ups and downs, they shared their struggles with sons who drink too much and husbands who are out of work. And as we talked, I realized how our loving God breaks down barriers and brings His children together. Ray and I delivered instructional notebooks and tapes from the Poway headquarters of "Moms in Touch." I felt honored to receive a lovely woven bag, and I enjoyed seeing Pastor Ray in the red Maasai robe they gave him. Sometimes the role of a pastor's wife is a symbolic one, and here was a good example. As we prayed, I tried to faithfully represent all of the American women in "Mom's in Touch" whom I wished could be here with us.

The next day was a very big event-- the Elma Barnett Children's Center was moving to a beautiful new property that the school will own: seven acres with a new boy's dorm and a new kitchen. The place is bare but gorgeous, with a long sweeping view of valleys and hills behind. For the last few months, the children have been volunteering to work on Saturdays to plant an elaborate "shamba" or vegetable garden where they will grow their own food. When we arrived and were greeted with big hugs, Ray and Jill were in their element. Jill had taught me that the core value for Kenyans is relationships, so the process of "Meet and Greet" represents not a surface "How are you?" but a deep concern for another's well being. That's why I think Ray and Jill feel so at home in Kenya—they share this value. Both of them are best at one-on-one relationships, and both are blissfully happy with Kenyans who love to laugh, tease, hug and share stories.

While Ray and Roy met with the schools' trustees to discuss title deeds, and financing, I visited the children. They are kind, good, thoughtful, smart, loving, generous, polite and very funny. I watched a group of twelve little girls (eight and nine year olds) as they made up their bunk beds. Now as I am a mom, grandma, and teacher, I have seen a lot of children, but I have never seen anything like this group. Cheerfully they hauled in mattresses, blankets and pillows and coordinated making up the beds. No one whined; no one complained. When I asked a pair of 6 year olds where they were to sleep, they happily showed me one bottom bunk which they would share. And then they showed me the real treasure—they each got a shelf. I was astonished. I thought of the mountain of toys that most American children have: Barbie dolls, Lego sets, DVDs, cell phones, and play stations. In contrast these orphans have nothing. A shelf. And they are happy.

The next day was Sunday, and after Ray and Jill and I each taught a Sunday School class at the church, Ray led the worship service at the new property, outside under the trees. After his sermon, a celebration included dedications by Roy, Ray, Willimena, (the school's director) and other supporters. There were many songs, and a "Green" skit which Jill and I presented on caring for the environment. Lots of children joined in as we emphasized the importance of picking up trash and caring for God's world. Later everyone enjoyed a meal that Willimena orchestrated.

If Roy is the soul of the Elma Barnett Center, then Willimena is the heart. She is a thirty one year old African woman who has a master's degree in counseling and a great deal of experience as a social worker. The International Red Cross has offered her twice her current salary to work for them, and she turned them down to stay with the Barnett children. On this day she organized all of the children and all of the food. The older boys slaughtered a goat, the traditional feast food, and some children cleaned cabbage and onions. The kitchen, which is made of mud, cow dung and straw, had just been finished the previous day, and now it contained a rock fireplace where the goat was roasted, flat bread was baked, and huge tubs of cabbage and rice were prepared. Out of that mud hut emerged a dinner for seventy people. After dinner, we distributed a T shirt for each child and a backpack with school and personal supplies that had been prepared by members of the Village Church in Rancho Santa Fe. The children were so grateful they giggled, laughed, sang, danced and thanked us again and again for honoring them with our visit.

Later in the week Ray, Jill and I traveled with a group of Kenyans and Americans to Karai, the other orphanage and school that RBCPC supports. Here extraordinary Christians are putting their faith in action by building God's kingdom. Stu and Linda

Ross work with the East African Presbyterian Church to bring groups on mission from the United States to work in Kenya. With the help of Drew, a gifted and talented young man, Stu has organized the building of over 200 schools and churches. Besides Christians, the only people building schools are Muslims, so there is quiet but fierce competition going on. In Karai we worked for two days to finish two nursery school rooms. The students of Karai helped, especially the older boys, who worked with Ray to add corrugated steel walls and to paint doors and windows. After my share of painting, I looked at the Karai curriculum. Since Kenya is officially a Christian country, there is a national curriculum called the "Christian Religious Course," which teaches the Bible and Christian history. Their purpose is "to enable learners to apply Biblical teaching to daily living." I was very impressed and later bought two workbooks to bring home.

Our last event was attending the Oldenyati church, located in the Massai Mara, far to the west of Nairobi, right on the edge of the Great Rift Valley that runs north all the way to Jordan. This church was built a year ago by a mission group that included Ray and other members of RBCPC. This year Ray preached a sermon on Peter whom Jesus reached down to lift up. After, I was invited by the minister to bless the children. I felt so honored! Later, our group shared a meal and met some of the congregation. I loved talking to a young Maasai husband and wife who were so proud of their little son who was just learning to walk. The father, Daniel gave heartfelt thanks over and over again. "We are so happy," he said, "to have a real church, where my son can learn about our Lord."

What a powerful witness he made!

After we all returned, I was looking at a picture of myself blessing the children. Behind me is a white cross, and in front of me is the group of African children. When I saw the picture, I burst out laughing. I look exactly like a...missionary! Isn't God great? What a trip. What a blessing.

.