

Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

What I Learned from the African Church:

Twenty-Two Students Reflect on
a Life-Changing Experience

Number 11 ■ Series editor: James R. Krabill



**Mennonite
Mission
Network**

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about *God's mission* in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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ISBN 1-933845-01-5

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Printed in the United States of America

Preface

On Aug. 30, 2005, 22 students from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., embarked on a three-month adventure unlike any they had ever experienced before.

The semester-long adventure was part of the academic program required at EMU to acquaint students with the lives, histories and cultures of people living beyond the shores of North America. This particular course was titled, “The Euro/Africa Cross-Cultural Experience.” It focused primarily on two French-speaking countries: France (the first half of the semester) and Benin, West Africa (second half), with three additional side trips to Switzerland, Togo and Ghana.

Four objectives were set for the students participating in the 13-week experience. It was anticipated they would:

- acquire and/or improve French language proficiency;
- develop personal relationships with the people of France and Benin through home stays in both countries;
- explore the historic cultural, religious and political similarities and differences existing between the two countries;
- experience church life in a wide range of settings, “from cathedrals and country chapels to mud-brick and tin-roofed meeting houses.”

One of the sub-themes of the semester was exploring the phenomenon we called “the rise of the southern church” — the amazing and rapidly growing number of churches and new religious movements mushrooming today throughout the southern hemisphere, especially in Africa. Equally fascinating for us, however, was the increasing impact these churches were having back in Europe, the historic “motherland” of Western Christianity. With over 250 African churches in Paris alone, the religious landscape of France is today undergoing a remarkable transformation that became a part of our exposure to the spread and influence of African Christianity far beyond its continent of origin.

It was our great privilege and honor as individuals and as a group to be hosted by African families and faith communities in both France and West Africa. With indescribable grace and generosity, we were invited into the lives and struggles of these Christian brothers and sisters as they shared with us the challenges they faced in being the faithful church in the difficult places where God had planted them.

It was no surprise to us when we heard of the outbreak of urban violence and car burnings in Paris one week after our departure from France. Only days before, we had spent five hours with church leaders at *Le Rocher* (“The Rock”), a large African congregation in the heart

of the capital, hearing stories of hardship and mounting tension in the immigrant community.

In stark contrast to this reality, the challenge for the church in Benin was quite different. Benin, we would soon discover, was the birthplace and heartland of the Voodoo religion — an active and powerful West African traditional religion that continues to shape the lives of many Beninese and millions more adherents throughout the African Diaspora in Europe, Haiti, Brazil and beyond.

Our group members did not all respond to these religious and cultural realities in the same manner. We were ourselves a study in cultural diversity, coming from largely white, middle-class and African American communities across the United States, but also from Canada, Puerto Rico, India, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

And so we became a learning community together — learning about God, about ourselves, about negotiating differences, and about celebrating victories on those occasions when seemingly insurmountable conflicts found resolution.

And in the midst of it all we also learned some of life's most important lessons by watching and experiencing what God was doing in and through our sisters and brothers in the African church. We will not soon forget the spiritual energy we felt in worship services, the deep faith we witnessed in family prayer times and Bible studies, the vigorous discussions we heard debating matters of politics and religion, and the quiet confidence we sensed from our hosts of belief in God's faithfulness despite living conditions that would drive most Western Christians to hopelessness and despair.

Philip Jenkins, in *The Next Christendom* — one of the required textbooks for our course — makes the statement that the churches in the global South are for all practical purposes “invisible” to Northern observers. That is no longer true for our group. The African church has become one with familiar faces, with fears and frustrations, yes, but one with a level of faith and fortitude that often put us to shame.

On behalf of my wife, Jeanette, adjunct professor for the semester, and our son, Matthew, who traveled with us as an assistant, I want to thank the 22 students featured in this booklet for sharing their lives with us as a family for a semester, and for agreeing to share their stories more broadly in the brief but insightful reflections readers of this volume are about to discover on the pages to follow.

James R. Krabill

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What I Learned from the African Church

Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience

James R. Krabill, editor

Shouting and Dancing Our Way to Worship

Jeremy Webster

Going to church in Benin opened my eyes to many new things. The local church I attended was named *Ministère du Réveil et de la Réconciliation*, or Revival and Reconciliation Ministry. The worship service took place in a style I had never really seen before. Dancing was a major feature, and loud prayer sessions were a standard part of the experience. This was something new to me. Never in my home church back in the States did the whole congregation stand up and form long lines to praise, sing and dance its way around the sanctuary!

As I sat week after week in Benin watching the service taking place, I found myself asking questions about worship and the church. What about dancing, lots of movement, loud prayers, screaming and shouting — do these really qualify for authentic worship? It took me quite a while to realize there was nothing wrong with these forms of expression. The problem was really mine, because I had never experienced or participated in anything like this before.

In many Western churches, these loud and active features are not something one sees on a regular basis. The church is thought of as a place to be formal and quiet, and many people, growing up with these understandings, prefer this style of worship. In Benin, however, Christians choose to dance and to pray and sing with the volume turned up full force. There is nothing wrong with this, I have come to believe. There are no absolute right and wrong ways to worship. What is important is worshipping God with all one's heart and doing it in a way that is most meaningful within the cultural context.

And Now, We Thank You for This Food ... Twice!

Raquel Schlabach-Ortiz

During my time in Benin I had the privilege of staying with a host family. On my very first day with them, I was awakened at 6 a.m. for morning prayers. I would soon discover that this was a tradition practiced *every* morning by the family! It was through these daily encounters during my six weeks in Benin that I learned about the vitality of prayer as communication with God.



Our family prayer on that very first morning was focused on thanking God for keeping us safe through the night, for allowing us to wake up and for destroying all the devil's plans to harm us. This prayer really got me thinking about all the things I take for granted and how little I express my thanks to God. Another experience that reinforced this attitude of gratefulness was when my host brother, at the end of a meal, bowed his head to thank God for the food, even though he had already done

so before the meal began. I came to realize that the small things I take for granted are actually the very ones keeping me alive!

Every morning at 6 a.m., whether rain or shine, happy or sad, tired or energized, my entire family woke up and started off the day by talking to God and studying his word. In addition, at different times during the week, the eldest siblings would go to prayer meetings in the middle of the night for up to three-hour blocks of time. The following morning, however, they would still get up at 6 a.m. for morning prayers before setting out on their daily activities. I was always astounded at their devotion to prayer.

Finally, I learned something in Africa about really having faith in my prayers. My family never just prayed to pray. They believed that God was listening to every word and would answer every prayer. Their words were never empty, as mine often are. They trusted God to keep them because they prayed about it. And the reality is that God does listen to every single word we say and every prayer we offer.

I left Benin with a new family, new friends, new experiences, and a new outlook on life. But above all, I left with a lesson in prayer and faith — a lesson that will follow me the rest of my life.

Setting Aside My American Mennonite Ways

Ryan Detweiler

I knew I would have to give up my North American Mennonite beliefs and traditions during my six weeks in Africa so I could learn from others. By giving them up, I don't mean getting rid of them. I mean setting them aside for a while so I could fully appreciate and learn from new cultures and ways of worship.

One thing I have learned from the African church and will carry with me back to the United States is Africa's passion for worship. It doesn't seem to matter where Africans worship, when they worship, how they worship, or what instruments they use in worship. What matters most is that they do it with all their hearts!

Christians in Benin come to church willing and ready to praise the Lord! Drums, dancing and loud singing are usually present in church services, and these help believers to enter fully into the worship experience.

Back in America, I attended a Mennonite church my whole life, and so I grew up knowing only one style of worship. I was fully comfortable with this and never felt the need to explore other styles of worship. My time in Africa has broadened my views of worship and what it means to praise the Lord. I have come to believe that even though we may worship in many and different ways, God is pleased by all types of worship.

Tezzia Ndandula, a Congolese student in our group, summarized this well when she told us, "I worship and pray the way I do because that is how we do it in my country. These are the ways I am comfortable with and accustomed to. I do not ask others to worship and pray the way I do, and I do not expect them to ask me to worship and pray the way they do. In the end, we as Christians are all worshipping and praising the same Lord. It is not important how we worship God, as long as in the end we give honor and praise to him. AMEN!"



Faith is a Journey

Sarah Ramer

For six weeks, I had the privilege of staying with a Beninese Christian family. The father was a Pentecostal pastor, and the entire family was deeply involved in the life of the church. During my time with them, I received a lesson in the importance of prayer.

Several mornings, the whole family got up early to pray together. This time of prayer always included thanksgiving, asking for forgiveness for sins and petitioning God for protection and guidance. It also included a brief Bible study. I was struck by the value of coming together as a family to pray in such a deliberate way.



Another activity I attended with them on two occasions was a *veil-lée*, or wake, that took place during the night. The first one was a simple gathering of two families for singing and prayer, and the second one was an all-night event involving many people speaking in tongues and something I am quite sure was exorcisms. I encountered things like this with my family that I had never before in my life experienced.

For a while, I began questioning myself and my faith. I was different from my family in Africa. I did not stay up all night praying, nor did I speak in tongues or witness exorcisms, and I did not constantly pray to God for protection from evil spirits. I could not understand how I could have seen myself as a good Christian when I was so obviously neglecting the spiritual disciplines of prayer.

The African church has taught me the importance of spiritual power, but that is not the only thing I learned. I also learned that I cannot judge myself or my faith by the standards of others. Faith is a journey. By encountering something different, I was challenged to grow. This does not mean that I will become an African Christian, but I have come away with a valuable lesson in understanding and appreciating the faith journeys of others.

Huh? What? You Want *Me* to Preach?

Valerie Showalter

I was speechless when Maman Dorcas asked, “Do you want to preach at church one Sunday?” As I sat at the breakfast table, all kinds of thoughts raced through my head. Who, me? A 21-year-old white girl from the United States preaching to a Beninese congregation that I barely knew? I heard myself saying yes, but my heart was pounding with doubts.

The week before I was to preach, I was told there was going to be a meeting at the church to talk about that Sunday’s service. From my North American experience, I expected a cut-and-dried meeting to discuss the upcoming program. Instead, I sat down with the pastor’s council to process through the Scripture selections and theme for the Sunday message. I was astounded at the questions and discussion that happened . . . and the respect and careful consideration that was given to each who spoke. What’s more, the actual pastor of the church talked very little. In fact, he had to be asked directly for his opinion!

Two-and-a-half hours later, I walked out of the church almost speechless. How often do our pastors at home sit down and try to discern with the congregants *before* the sermon the meaning and relevance of the Scripture on the topic? And how often do they meet in a group like this where many generations are represented? If groups like these do exist in my home church, I thought, then they are kept well-hidden from my sight!

I have come to believe that we shouldn’t expect to go to church and be fed for the week with no responsibility for the production and preparation of the food. We must help in the process of planting, tending and harvesting in our own congregations if we want to come close to the will of God. Discernment of the Sunday message should not be reserved for only those who have been through seminary or who are experienced pastors. Discernment is a multigenerational, multiracial, multi-background, all-inclusive practice that should occur regularly inside the walls of each individual church. How healthy can the body of Christ be unless each member is responsible for its upkeep and vision?

It All Depends What You Mean by “Underdeveloped”

Sabrina Tusing

My first exposure to African Christianity took place in Paris, France, where our group worshipped with African believers at Le Rocher (“The Rock”). When we first arrived at the church, we walked into a large warehouse building. The worship band was doing some warm-up practice before the service, but then to my amazement the warm-up never stopped! Unlike in my home congregation, there never really was an introduction to the service. People just kept right on worshipping until the seats were full of people, dancing, singing and yelling “Alleluia!” I had an amazing time experiencing something so different and lively, and all I could think about was what was still in store for me during my upcoming visit to Africa.

On my first Sunday in Benin, the excitement of seeing what worship would be like was almost killing me. When I arrived at church with my host family, I could hear loud music outside, even before we entered the building. Once inside, we found a group of more than 200 worshippers, joyfully singing and playing music. Surprisingly, though, this church did not dance. And perhaps because of that, I felt a deep sense of relaxation, almost like being at home.

The sermon that first Sunday lasted almost an hour and a half, preached first in French and then translated into Fon, a local native language. I focused most of my time watching people in the congregation. Some folks got tired and began to doze off. But not for long! Men and women with bright blue shirts wandered up and down the aisles gently poking people with sticks to wake them up.

Prayers were always done aloud and simultaneously by everyone in the congregation. Such a style made it hard for this Mennonite kid to pray! I had trouble thinking with all that noise!

As for my home life, every Sunday night the whole family gathered for evening prayer and singing. We usually started with three songs, and then my host mother would lead in a 30-minute chant-like prayer. The evening ended with personal praises or concerns.

During the week, the family never did group prayers, except at the dinner table. My mother, however, found time each morning for singing, alone in her room. I would praise along with her in the silence of getting ready in the room next door ... the shower.

Many people have the impression that Africa is an unstable and underdeveloped continent. While it may be true that many Africans

live much more simply than we Westerners do, one thing is certain: The work that God is doing in people's lives and through the church is *far* from underdeveloped! In Africa, I learned new ways of worshiping, new forms of prayer and a new understanding that no matter what worship style one uses, God is always listening.

Discovering the Power and Protection of Jesus

Karra Black

Faith in Jesus is not about safety and protection. At least, that is what most Americans believe. But in Africa, and specifically in Benin, Jesus is the only way to protect one's life from Voodoo.

Rarely in the United States do I hear people petition God for protection from anything or anybody, other than the occasional prayers for "safe travel." I heard Christians in Benin, however, spending a significant amount of time asking God to protect them from evil forces in the world. To these Christians, the devil is real in the form of Voodoo and physical acts of evil that believers actually can see.

The devil shows up in different ways, depending on whom he is dealing with. In America, he has disguised himself so that we don't often feel as though evil is present. He is so subtle that we can hardly name any of his tactics. His main weapon that I am aware of is messages coming to us via the media. Through movies, TV, magazines and music, Satan can easily take hold of parts of our lives. Before living with African Christians, I never thought to pray for protection from these things, and this leaves me unprepared when the devil tries to use them against me.

In Benin, Christians are prepared to face evil. They know that evil is real and reveals itself in the form of Voodoo. They pray constantly for God to protect their lives and the lives of those they love. A person's only hope for safety is the power of Jesus Christ.



I learned from the church in Africa that the only way to protect oneself from the evil in the world is by calling on the name of Jesus. To a Westerner, evil may not seem to exist, but it does. No matter what form evil might take in different cultures, Jesus is always there and necessary.

Is America Ready for Missionaries from Africa?

Mary Yoder

Growing up in the Mennonite Church, I had heard many times about missionaries in Africa. I heard about them during prayer requests, in Sunday school, in people's testimonies, at my Mennonite high school and in some of the books I had read. Because of this, I should have had a pretty clear understanding of what mission work in Africa was all about. However, for some reason, I thought the sole reason all these missionaries were going to Africa was to tell uninformed Africans about God and to share the gospel.

During the time our group spent in France, we started reading a book by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, which talked about Christianity's rapid movement south. The concept of Africa being the most Christian-populated continent in the world was news to me. All this time, I had thought of Africa as the continent that "needed to be saved" or that "needed most to hear about Jesus." But based on what we were learning, the numeric growth of the church in Africa is actually surpassing that of the Western world!

This all became reality when I got settled in with my host family in Cotonou. I honestly felt as if I was the one being converted. One church I attended preached against short skirts, rock 'n' roll, and facial piercings, while I tried to hide my nose-irring from the pastor.

My host mom listened to praise-and-worship songs in the morning, most of which were in English. Whenever she would ask if I knew the Ameri-



can artist performing the music, I would have no idea. For one, most of them looked to be from the 1980s, but for another, I rarely listen to praise and worship music back in the States. She had DVDs of American evangelical speakers with thousands of people in the audience, and I would not have a clue who any of these speakers were.

When walking through the sandy streets of Cotonou or pausing for a traffic light on a *zemidjan* (moped taxi), I often heard prayers, singing and shouts of “Amen!” coming from various open churches. During my visit, I was encouraged to pray more, sing louder and dance for the Lord. I guess the main thing I learned about the African church is that it is very much alive, at least in Benin. I learned that Africans could very well be the next missionaries sent to the United States to share the good news of Jesus.

My Pastor-Father Taught Me the Importance of Commitment over Comfort

Trevor Bare

During my time in Benin, I stayed with a host family and had a pastor for a “papa.” Because of the amount of time my host father committed to pastoring, I assumed it was his full-time job. I was to learn after several weeks, however, that he in fact had another full-time job that funded his ministry. I learned that his congregation was too small to financially support him, thus eliminating the issue of “preaching for money” — a problem that plagues some churches in Benin.

Most of what I have experienced with regard to the African church comes from conversations with my host father and from observing him and participating with him in his many activities.

On the very first day, my father informed me there would be an all-night prayer service that coming Friday. This turned out to be a fitting way to introduce me to his life, filled with intense spiritual activity of this nature. One weekend when I accompanied him, my father put in a full workday on Friday, prayed through most of the night, traveled to a nearby town to invite people to a weekend retreat at the church, shared the gospel with those who wanted and prayed for the sick. All of this happened while he was fasting from both food and water during the daylight hours on Friday and Saturday.

The church my father pastors has a serious vision and believes that God will answer their prayer, fasting and evangelism through people coming to faith. The weekend I traveled with my father was only a small beginning — a preparatory time for a spiritual retreat still two weeks away when the *really* serious praying, fasting and outreach would be taking place!

What I have learned from these experiences is not so much a model or a mold, but a mindset. Coming from a culture that loves comfort, I have gained more of a willingness to sacrifice the comforts of this world for God, whether through giving, fasting, prayer or making myself vulnerable by sharing my faith with others.

Forced to Confront My Own Hidden Fears

Pam Mandigo

One of the first things I noticed about the African church — or, more specifically, the Beninese church — was the intensity of prayer. People pounded their fists and stomped their feet and shouted. I asked my host mother why people prayed in such an aggressive manner, and she responded that the point of such prayers was to crush the evil spirits that would otherwise attack them. The more I questioned members of the Beninese church, the more I realized that much of their religious activity is driven by fear of evil forces, even if this is not always the conscious objective.

At first, I was dismayed. How could a people who claimed to be so committed to the Lord continue to live in fear? Why were they seemingly unable to fully live out the joy and peace that comes with salvation in Christ? It seemed so wrong. How could they claim to be Christians if they still believed in the power of witchcraft, Voodoo and other “dark forces”?

As time has passed, however, God forced me to examine my own faith and the faith of my church in America. Someone once said that the devil is a chameleon; he takes the form that most compels and intimidates a given society. In West Africa, the devil comes in the forms of witchcraft, Voodoo, curses and fetishes. In America, the devil takes the shape of financial troubles, the ambiguity of the future, loneliness and failure. These are things that I, and many other Westerners, fear. And these fears are no more pleasing to God than the fears of supernatural beings and happenings that some African Christians have.

God calls us to trust him completely. More than anything else, Jesus repeated over and over to his disciples, “Don’t be afraid.” While it is easy to look at others and criticize their fears and weaknesses, God calls us to look first at our own lives. Spending time in the African church has forced me to confront my own hidden fears and place my complete confidence in God once again.

The African church taught me that no fear is worse than the next in the eyes of God. If we are going to truly live out the joy and peace that God has given us, we must first turn over our deepest fears to him, whatever those fears might happen to be.

Is Jesus Really for *Everyone*?

Denise Reesor

I was a Christian prior to my trip to Benin. I had accepted that Jesus was the Son of God and that through him people could receive comfort, reconciliation and salvation. I knew and believed all of this. What I struggled with, however, was understanding how Jesus and Christianity were supposed to be intended for the whole world — the only way to God. With so many religions in the world and so many different kinds of people, how could I assume that Jesus was relevant and the answer to *everyone’s* spiritual needs?

My two months spent living, worshipping and conversing with Beninese Christians taught me two things that changed my perspective on Christianity and Jesus’ role in the world.

The first thing I realized was the magnitude of Jesus’ power and purpose across the globe. The church in Africa is growing so rapidly because people there genuinely need Jesus. They come to Christianity for the healing, protection and comforting powers of Jesus Christ. This desperate need struck and moved me. I was astonished to see how needed and present Jesus was in Benin.

This revelation, then, made me reflect on life in North America and how so many people need Jesus just as much (though perhaps for culturally different reasons) but simply don’t recognize Jesus as the answer to their problems in the way Africans do. Though the specific needs and sufferings are different from one society to another, the authenticity of Jesus provides answers and relief to all struggles and voids.



Front row (left to right): Tezzia Ndandula, Ryan Detweiler, James Krabill, Jeremy Webster, Raquel Schlabach-Ortiz.

Second row (left to right): Pam Mandigo, Jon Styer, Sarah Ramer, Mary Yoder, Kara Miller, Sabrina Tusing, Valerie Showalter, Wendy Lorismé, Jeanette Krabill, Anisha Devadason, Rebecca Troyer, Karra Black.



Third row (left to right): Dominick Porter, Elisabeth Johnson, Denise Reesor, Luke Yoder, Deric Delp, Trevor Bare, Brad Graber, Matthew Krabill.

I obviously still have many questions about God's role and way of working in the world through Christian faith and through other religions, but my experience with the African church has shown me God's greatness and power across the globe. The African church has taught me about the universality of Jesus Christ and, because of this, that a relationship with Jesus *does* seem to be God's desire or ideal for each person in the world.

On Giving Food Offerings and Drinks to "the Dead"

Dominick Porter

The thing I will remember the longest from my time in Benin is my encounter with the Voodoo religion and the challenge it presents to the Christians in the churches I got to visit.

My host father in Benin was a well-known pastor. Instead of serving one single congregation, he visited different church communities almost every weekend. I traveled with him on these trips.

In one church we visited, I was made aware of the impact the Voodoo religion had on the Christians in that area. I noticed at the beginning of the worship service that the church members were praying and singing to rid the church building of any Voodoo spirits that might have inhabited it. I thought this was odd since many of the Christians I had talked to in Benin said that the Voodoo spirits couldn't hurt you if you had Christ in your life.

After the worshippers had cast out all of the Voodoo spirits, the preacher then exhorted the congregation on the dangers of giving food offerings and drinks to "the dead" (deceased ancestors). I found it interesting that a sermon was actually given to explain why this was an inappropriate practice for believers. After the service, I spoke with a man who told me he was "very upset they needed to talk about this today." He added, "This is what we deal with *every* Sunday." I took from his remarks that when people try to move toward Christ, their traditional religious roots often follow along with them into their new faith.

I find it interesting that everywhere you go in the world you can see the devil at work. If it is violence and killings in parts of America, declining church attendance in France, or Voodoo worship in Africa, one thing is for sure: The devil is definitely a-workin'!

“What Are American Christians Thinking?”

Elisabeth Johnson

At the end of my interview with Irene Amon, a master’s-level student from the Good News Theological College and Seminary in Ghana, I asked, “How do Christians in Africa view Christians in the United States?” I knew this would be a loaded question, and I asked it out of a sudden impulse and desire for a real answer, blunt though it may be.

I was not disappointed. Irene laughed off her initial shock and then replied with a few questions of her own: “What are American Christians thinking? Are they just going through the routine of praying, or are they really serious about their faith? How can they take so much about their life for granted and fail to see the needs of others? I sometimes wonder how they can even call themselves Christians.”

These questions were harsh, but they came from a woman truly concerned for a group of people who were like strangers to her, people who seldom glanced outside their borders enough to see and understand the inequality that was a part of her everyday life.

Jesus speaks of a narrow path leading to salvation, of a few seeds scattered along the ground that escape the rocks, the sun and the thorns; of people who take up their crosses and walk with the grace of God. These people are an exception to the majority and possess an earnest longing and desire for faith. I do not find the United States to be a place of faithless believers, but rather a place where we are in a constant struggle to remember our blessings, to help one another, to share with those in need and to fear our Lord.

If You Haven’t Sweated, You Haven’t Worshipped

Deric Delp

Have you ever been to church for more than 20 hours in one week? For my host family living in Cotonou, Benin, 20 hours was about the average. Now, *that* is commitment!

Christians in the congregation where I attended gave so much of their time and energy to Jesus. Their faith was constantly being tested. They were surrounded by people who practiced Voodoo and Islam. It took a great deal of courage for these Christians to stand up for their faith. When I get back to the United States, I hope I will be able to stand as proud and firm as they do.



I learned a lot about worship during my time in Benin. At home in Pennsylvania, we stand or sit motionless for the entire worship experience and show little or no emotion. My church in Benin was very charismatic. We would sing for long periods of time and dance with all our energy. By the end of worship, I was always covered with sweat. This style of worship requires you to be awake and alert. I enjoyed it and am going to miss it when I return home.

The way people prayed in Benin was also much different from what I was accustomed to. When I pray at home, it is silent and I am standing or sitting still. At my church in Benin, though, people prayed aloud as they snapped their fingers, clapped their hands or paced around. Now, imagine 200 people in one congregation doing that, all at the same time! At first I thought it was chaotic, but after a few weeks I grew to like the intensity of this kind of worship.

Going back to worship in the United States will be a challenge for me. I am hoping I will be able to implement the commitment and courage of what I've seen in Beninese Christians into my own life, along with some aspects of their worship.

Morning Prayers as a Family Brought Me Closer to God

Kara Miller

My time in Africa provided me with many occasions for growth and learning, especially in areas related to my spiritual life.

The spiritual aspect of the time I spent in Africa particularly surprised me; I never anticipated what an impact this would have on me. The church in Africa gave me new insights into worshipping God, but it was from my host family that I learned the most.

Every morning for five weeks in Cotonou I woke up at 6 a.m. with my family to have worship and prayer. In the beginning, this was something I dreaded because I was so tired at that time of the morning. By the end of my stay, however, it became something I respected and learned from.

My entire family was very hardworking. This was especially true of my parents. They both worked long hours and came home late at night, only to deal with more work on the domestic front. The hours they worked had to be tiring, and by the end of the day they seemed exhausted. What impressed me most was that even after these long days they still had the motivation to wake up early each morning and praise God. I was the one complaining to myself in the beginning, but *they* were the ones working many times harder than I!

The morning worship times together as a family brought me closer to God. I have never prayed as much as I did while in Africa, and the result has given me a spiritual uplift. My host family and others around me impressed me so much with their spirituality, and I realized how much more I have to learn.

How My Stereotypes Began to Change

Brad Graber

When I first went to Africa, I was skeptical. I was skeptical about how conservative African churches would be in their thinking and practice. I had come to believe, after reading many different articles on African Christianity, that the church in Africa would be shallow and immature. After all, given the incredible growth rate of Christianity on much of the African continent, it is normal to expect that faith might be less mature there than in the Western church, which has been around for a much longer time.

My actual church experience in Africa, however, was not like that at all. I could not understand everything at first because of the language barrier, but as my French improved, I started to understand more of the content of the prayers and sermons. I heard songs and prayers that were similar to those I would hear in my home setting. And I heard sermons like those I was accustomed to — sermons that challenged people to live out their Christian faith and follow Jesus' teachings in their everyday life.

One example that stood out most to me was an incident that happened to my 14-year-old host brother. He described to me how one day his friend accused him of stealing and pushed him around, even threatening to beat him up. He told me that he was actually bigger than the other kid, that he could have easily beaten him up himself, but that he

wouldn't because he was a Christian and that "Jesus wouldn't do that." I was very impressed by this reaction, not only because he *said* the right thing, but because he *did* it!

By living in a family in a different country and culture, I was able to observe people's sincerity and watch my own stereotypes begin to break down. I have learned how to better appreciate other worship styles and especially the importance of prayer. I also have learned how much influence culture has on Christianity. Although Christians may look and worship differently, the most important thing is the sincerity they bring to the worship experience and the centrality of Jesus in that worship. As I return home, I hope to look at other churches and forms of worship with new eyes.

Crossing the Bridge from Voodoo Tom-Toms to the Rhythms of Christian Drumming

Wendy Lorismé

In going to any new country, there are many things a person is able to learn. You can learn about the people's music, their art and their culture. But especially for Christians, it is also important to learn about the church in the land.

As a child growing up in Haiti, I was surrounded by Voodoo beliefs and practices, but I also had become acquainted with many of the churches in the country. When as a young girl I moved with my family to the United States, it opened the door for me to explore even

more churches and denominations.

The Lord has truly blessed me by giving me the opportunity to go to Benin — my roots — to visit many churches and to see and experience how people worship the Lord there.

One church I visited while in Benin was Jesuko, or "Jesus Village." Jesuko



was a fishing village built on stilts out on the water in a lagoon north of the city of Cotonou. The village church was the most different church I had experienced in my entire life. It was definitely not what would be anyone's first choice of a place to worship. The rickety wood-framed structure was built with a tin roof, next to an outdoor toilet, and was furnished with unstable benches about to break or fall over. But it was in this church that I experienced God's true love for all people, both the wealthy and the poor. It was amazing to see how God reached these people in this place, far from anywhere I had even known existed.

Much of my time in Jesuko, I found that all I could do was thank God for opening my eyes to the powerful works he was doing with these, my people. It was in Jesuko that I was able to begin letting go of the feeling that I would forever be trapped in the traditional world of Voodoo. It was in this church that I was able to cross the bridge from the beat of Voodoo tom-toms to accepting the rhythms of Christian drumming.

It was amazing for me to see that even though the roots of Voodoo can be traced to Benin, many Beninese today are trying hard to move away from it and look toward Jesus, while the people of Haiti are still stuck in a stage dominated by the Voodoo religion. This I find both sad and unfortunate.

The Sunday Morning Service that Woke Me Up to a New Reality

Luke Yoder

Before reading Philip Jenkins' book, *The Next Christendom*, I had no idea of the growth and importance of the church in the South, especially in Africa. Now that I have spent nearly seven weeks in West Africa and have seen the church firsthand, I can better appreciate its size and the value the African church brings to the whole. I have learned a lot from the church in Africa, but I will focus my remarks mostly on what I learned about worship styles.

Coming from a "traditional" North American Mennonite congregation, I was unfamiliar with dancing, praying aloud together as a group and marching my offering up to the front of the sanctuary to place it in a basket. At first, I was very uncomfortable with this kind of worship and did not try to understand the differences. I knew my stay in Africa



was only temporary, so I tried to ignore the differences, choosing not to learn from them at all.

Then our group traveled from Benin to Ghana and attended the Edwinase Mennonite Church where I saw for the first time Mennonites worshipping in this different way as well. It was a real wake-up call for me to see such a distinct difference between African and North American parts of my own denomination. At that point, I knew I had to take this difference more seriously.

During that Sunday morning service, I realized that even though our worship styles were so different, I was beginning to feel a lot more comfortable in this new setting. I realized that even though the way we praise God and the clothes we wear to do it are so different, the Bible we read and the God we worship are the same.

When I return home, I will likely not dance in church or march my offering to the front of the sanctuary. I will have learned, however, that there are a variety of ways to worship God. The church in the southern hemisphere will only continue to grow, that is certain. So understanding the differences and learning from Christians there is critical to the future of the church as a whole.

It Felt Like a Part of Me That Had Almost Disappeared Floated Back to the Surface

Anisha Devadason

I learned many things about worship during my time in Africa: congregational participation in Sunday church services, morning devotional times, observing the way people worshipped God with such fervor and the way they prayed so intensely for a loving God to listen to them. These were all exciting experiences and memories I will take back with me to the States.

But can I say it was really a *new* experience for me? Probably not entirely. There was a hint, a suggestion of something — a style of worship — almost forgotten from my past life in Asia, but not quite. It was a feeling of familiarity, and I found myself quickly adapting to this “new” style of worship and “different” way of praying. It seemed almost

natural to dance to the music, clap hands to keep the beat, pray aloud with everyone and say amen throughout the service. It felt like a part of me that had almost disappeared during my time in the United States was allowed to float back to the surface.

Feeling like a fully accepted member of the church where I worshipped in Benin came so easy and fast. The congregation was truly friendly and open, and Christ shone through them by their actions.

I found it difficult to listen to a service that was mostly in the Fon language — a language I did not understand. But the message was always preached in French, and I discovered that the longer I attended the church, the more I came to understand.

Morning devotionals were an interesting new experience for me. My host father and I would have our devotional with other staff members at his place of work each morning before I went to school. I loved these times for the songs we sang, the Scripture that was read, and the closing prayer we prayed for those who were traveling and for the work that lay ahead of us that day. It was wonderful to see how staff members would turn up before work every morning for these devotional times.

The most important lesson I learned throughout my time in Benin was about faith and hope in our God and how to keep that alive through worship.

"Am I Going to Get Used to This?" I Wondered

Rebecca Troyer

My first time worshipping in an African church happened in Paris, France. Many thoughts ran through my head the first few minutes of the worship service: "Is this how they *all* are?" I wondered. "I'm going to be in Benin for seven weeks ... am I going to get used to this?" I just felt so out of place. I had never experienced anything like it. The dancing, the praying and the length of the service were all new to me.

One of the first things I noticed was the absence of printed hymnals or songbooks. The music leader simply started a song and everyone joined in. Many of the songs were only a few lines long, so it was not necessary to have them written down. But the church members also knew more hymn-like songs by heart. Then I realized if they were holding songbooks, they would not be able to dance and clap along as they do.

When Africans dance, they really put their whole bodies into it. But unlike the dancing in some places back home, the dancing I experienced in the African church is not intended to show off the body. Africans dance to show the joy they feel. It is true genuine worship, done for the glory of God.

At first, I did not understand why dancing was so important to African worship. I was used to calm worship, which at most included a bit of handclapping and swaying along. I also was unaccustomed to praying aloud as a group. But I had to be reminded that God has created us all different, so we each have unique ways of worshipping. God hears our prayers whether spoken aloud or remaining silent in our heads. As long as our worship is done for the glory of God, the style one chooses really does not matter.

Christ Is More Powerful than Voodoo

Tezzia Ndandula

I have learned so much about the African church. Ever since our group began preparing to go to Africa, I was looking forward to learning more about prayer life on the continent. Reading Jenkins' book, *The Next Christendom*, and discovering how big the church was becoming made me even more excited.

In Paris, after just one worship service with the African believers there, I was ready to go to Africa. I really wanted to grow spiritually and to experience the community life of the church.

My first week in Benin surprised and disappointed me a bit because I saw and heard more about Islam than about Christianity. That was due in part to the Muslim mosque with its booming loudspeaker located right next to the home where I was staying! In Benin, I was to discover, there were both large Christian and Muslim populations and each was growing very fast.

In my mind I had pictured Benin as a place where one could find a church on every street corner like in my home country, the Congo. That wasn't quite the case. I also learned that while Beninese do pray, they don't make nearly as much commotion in their worship as do the Christians in Congolese churches.

One thing I couldn't comprehend in Benin was when I heard that Voodoo was still practiced among some Christians. As far as I am

concerned, when people come to Christ they don't go back to fetishes because Christ is more powerful than all that. To me, people who still practice Voodoo as Christians are people who have not truly been converted and experienced the power of God in their lives.

In conclusion, the church in Africa is growing, but it still has a lot of work to do. Christians need to trust in God and realize all the wonders the Lord has in store for them.

Passion and Intensity for God, Unlike Anything I've Ever Seen

Jon Styer

My experience with the church in Africa was different from that of most students in our group. During my time in Benin, I traveled extensively with my host father and never visited the same church twice. So, perhaps the best way for me to describe what I learned from the African church is to describe one experience I had.

On my last Sunday in Cotonou, I accompanied my father, Théophan, to a church where he had been invited to preach. His motorized bike was not working, so we took *zemidjans* (moped taxis) into town. Then we crammed into an already overcrowded car-taxi. We drove for many miles on the coastal road past Benin's capital city of Porto-Novo and were dropped off at the side of the highway.

I looked around in every direction and saw nothing but barren fields with sporadic vegetation. From there, we walked down a small, sandy street that appeared to go nowhere. It had already been a 50-minute commute, and the sun was out in full force. I was beginning to wonder why anyone would come this far for church. Then a moped came by and gave us a ride.

Eventually we arrived in a small village. The gray cement church building with a tin roof was packed full with people singing and dancing. I watched in amazement as mothers gyrated in rhythmic dancing with sleeping babies tied to their backs. I stood there and tried to clap to the African drumbeat and realized that there was nothing, other than the occasional "Halleluiah" and "Amen," that I recognized or that seemed familiar to me. However, there



was a high level of energy, intensity and passion about the people that made the whole place feel alive. Even the sermon kept the same intensity.

I learned a lot about the church in Africa from this experience and many others I had during my time in Benin. I could only imagine having to travel that kind of distance every Sunday for church. It helped me to look at and re-evaluate my own commitments.

There is a passion and intensity for God here in Africa that is unlike anything I have ever seen. I think a lot of Western church worship has gone stale, and we have a lot to learn from the energy of African worship and spirituality. I have learned to respect a new kind of worship, a new kind of Christian, and a new kind of church ... the *African* church.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are your first impressions upon reading the stories recounted here?
2. Which recurring themes or observations appear most frequently in the student reflections?
3. Which of the stories did you find the most surprising? The most inspiring? The most troubling?
4. Have you ever worshipped with people whose style was significantly different from your own? How did your reaction to that experience compare with or contrast to what the students describe here?
5. Sabrina Tusing writes: “While it may be true that many Africans live much more simply than we Westerners do, one thing is certain: The work that God is doing in people’s lives and through the church is far from underdeveloped!” What does Sabrina mean by this statement? In what ways is this affirmation illustrated by other student observations throughout the booklet?
6. What do you make of all the talk of “the devil” and “evil spirits,” so common in the language and experience of many African Christians? Do you think such forces actually exist, or is this just a form of cultural expression?
7. Several students refer to Satan as “a chameleon,” “showing up in different ways depending on who he is dealing with,” and “taking the form that most compels and intimidates a given society.” Do you agree with this assessment? If so, how does this play out in North American culture?
8. Denise Reesor struggled with the question, “Is Jesus really for *everyone*?” and ended her essay by stating, “The African church has taught me ... that a relationship with Jesus does seem to be God’s desire or ideal for each person in the world.” How do you deal with the question Denise raises? Has the faith of African Christians described in this booklet caused you to think new thoughts on the matter, one way or another?

Additional Resources

- ◆ ANDERSON, Allan, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2001).
- ◆ “Christians on the Margins — The European Reality,” *Beyond Ourselves* [Mission Network quarterly magazine] Vol. 4, No. 2 (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Mission Network, 2005).
- ◆ “Confronting the Powers,” *The Cloud of Witnesses* video series (No. 2) focusing on churches in West Africa (Harrisonburg, Va.: Mennonite Media, 1996).
- ◆ DANEEL, Inus, *Quest for Belonging* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1987).
- ◆ HANCILES, Jehu J., “God’s Mission through Migration: African Initiatives in Globalizing Mission,” in *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies*, edited by James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky and Charles Van Engen (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 58-66.
- ◆ JENKINS, Philip, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ◆ KRABILL, James R., *Euro-Africa Cross-Cultural Program: A Reader* [curriculum manual and reader of selected articles for French-language, cross-cultural semester in France and Benin] (Harrisonburg, Va.: Eastern Mennonite University, 2005).
- ◆ KRABILL, James R., *The Short-Term Experience: Current Trends/ Future Challenges* [Mission Insight No. 2] (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1999).
- ◆ KRABILL, James R., *Where Teachers Become Learners and Learners, Teachers: MBM Marks Four Decades of Ministry with African-Initiated Churches* [Mission Insight No. 23] (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001).
- ◆ SHANK, David A., *What Western Christians Can Learn from African-Initiated Churches* [Mission Insight No. 10] (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions 2000).
- ◆ YONG, Amos, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005).

The *Missio Dei* Series

- No. 1 Calvin E. Shenk, *Understanding Islam: A Christian Reflection on the Faith of our Muslim Neighbors* (2002).
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- No. 9 Delbert Erb and Linda Shelly, *The Patagonia Story: Congregations in Argentina and Illinois Link "Arm-in-Arm" for Mission* (2005).*
- No. 10 *Together in Mission: Core Beliefs, Values and Commitments of Mennonite Mission Network* (2006).*
- No. 11 James R. Krabill, editor, *What I Learned from the African Church: Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience* (2006).

*Available in Spanish.

What I Learned from the African Church

Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience

On Aug. 30, 2005, 22 students from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., embarked on a three-month adventure unlike any they had ever experienced before.

The semester-long adventure was part of the academic program required at EMU to acquaint students with the lives, histories and cultures of people living beyond the shores of North America. This particular course focused primarily on two French-speaking countries, France (the first half of the semester) and Benin, West Africa (second half), with three additional side trips to Switzerland, Togo and Ghana. Group members did not all respond to the religious and cultural realities they discovered in the same manner. They were themselves a diverse group, coming from range of backgrounds and locations. Thus they became a learning community together — learning about God, about themselves, about negotiating differences, and about celebrating victories on those occasions when seemingly insurmountable conflicts found resolution.

The 22 students featured in this booklet share their stories in insightful 300- to 400-word reflections on what they learned from the experience as guests within homes in each country, worshipers in a wide range of church settings, and observers of their host culture.

ISBN bar-code imprint area

U.S. \$3.95



Mennonite Mission Network

The mission agency of Mennonite Church USA

Great Lakes office, P.O. Box 370, Elkhart, IN 46515-0370

Great Plains office, P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114-0347

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