

UU Without Borders Blog

A Journal of the ICUU Leadership Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, February, 2008

The African U+U Leadership Conference is ready to start

This is the letter that Rev. Brian Kiely, current President of the [ICUU](#) and member of the teaching staff, is circulating about the upcoming Leadership Conference for emerging Unitarian and Universalist congregations in Central Africa:

Dear Friends and Colleagues.

[On Sunday, February 3rd,] right after church I leave for Nairobi, Kenya in advance of the ICUU African Leadership School which starts Thursday. The international faculty will work with 60 participants from Congo, Burundi, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya. As you will probably know there is deep sadness and distress Kenya That nation has been the poster child for peace, stability and democracy in Africa since not long after independence in the 1960's. However a disputed and arguably blatantly stolen presidential election on December 27 has sparked waves of tribally based violence. Over 800 are dead and thousands more are homeless. Most significantly there has been a widespread collapse of the social safety net. As always, it is the very poor who are being harmed the most. While most parts of Nariobi are safe, especially for Caucasians, we struggled long and hard with the decision to go ahead this week. The concern was the safety of the students. The vast majority are eager to attend despite the obstacles, so we are going ahead, carefully and hopefully.

I would ask for your prayers, your thoughts, your candles of concern for all of us making this historic journey.

A UUSC team has just returned from fact-finding mission to Kenya. You can read [Charlie Clement's excellent blog](#).

In case you are interested our faculty is led by Rev. Jill McAllister (USA) and includes Rev. David Usher (England), Rev. Gordon Oliver (South Africa). All three are past presidents of the ICUU. We also have Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt of New York. We had hoped to have a member from Transylvania and one from India, but a combination of newborns and visa problems made that impossible. We will also have an observer from UUSC and the UUA and will be joined by ICUU Executive Director John Clifford.

This is an expensive exercise for an organization with ICUU's small budget. The majority of funds have been raised from individuals and congregations across North America and Great Britain. As well, most of the faculty have raised all or part of their own travel expenses. We are still several thousand dollars short. Following the conference Jill McAllister and I will be renewing our fundraising efforts with, among other things, a downloadable media presentation. If you feel called to contribute to this in some way, please [contact John Clifford](#) and he will let

you know the best way to do so for your country of residence.

I will do my best to keep in touch over the next two weeks. We hope to be able to set up a blog, and I will let you know how to access it when I have details. Otherwise I'll keep in touch via this chatline.

Rev. Brian Kiely

Unitarian Church of Edmonton

President, International Council of Unitarians and Universalists

African UU Leadership Conference, Day 1

The Rev. Brian Kiely, president of the ICUU, is reporting from Nairobi, Kenya:

Kenya Day one

The Kenyan Airway (Pride of Africa) 777 flew down the Rift Valley as night began to fade. A small crescent moon hung over the spot where the sun would rise.

Gradually a friendly redness warmed the eastern night sky, and then muted red of the sun itself slowly illuminating the dry earth below. To the east was Mt. Kenya arising from the shadows and morning mist. By the time we landed at 7 a.m. it was full daylight. Cars could be seen on the four lane Mombassa Road leading into the city – a good sign that things were peaceful.

For most of my travels, I had been relaxed. The decision had been made to come to Kenya, the preparations were done, the Sunday service completed well and I had made it to the airport on time. But now, with Kenya appearing below me, I felt a thrill of anxiety again. Would our students be safe? The media and our Kenyan contacts offered some conflicting reports, and there certainly were violence and strife in the western Rift Valley region. Nairobi had seen its share of death and displacement, although that had been mostly confined to the Kibera slum well away from where we would be. Deciding, with Jill McAllister, to go ahead with the conference had been the hardest decision I had ever made. We were helped by the non-Kenyan Africans. They had expressed concern, but all had said to go ahead. Now we would see.

I had learned from Charlie Clements' UUSC blog that two weeks before the planes had been barely half full. Things must be getting a little better because this one seemed closer to 70 per cent. Still, I had a row to myself and was able to stretch out during the 7.5 hour overnight flight from Amsterdam.

We descended over the enormous wildlife reserve south of the city. There were acres and acres of empty space. I could see first, near a winding river, an elegant resort standing all alone with yellow compound walls and red tile roofs. Then there was a line of fence, a roadway and shanty villages side by side with steel and

cement plants. We landed easily, the graceful acacia trees silently witnessing from a distance. A UN jet and four engine prop plane stood waiting on the apron. I would learn inside that they were waiting to emplane a troop of Kenyan peacekeepers heading off for a mission in another land. It seemed oddly reassuring given the state of unrest in Kenya . Those might haven foreign troops coming in to keep peace.

Jomo Kenyatta airport is alive with color and activity. It is cramped with 12 foot hallways but runs efficiently. By 7 a.m. the stores with food and liquor, Kenyan art products and other items were open and starting to get busy. A remarkably diverse crowd of people from white backpackers to elegantly dressed women in tribal finery pushed down the halls. There were no signs of tension. In fact, it was one of the most relaxed airports I had ever been in.

I cleared immigration quickly. I joined one long line, but an official came over to me. He kindly asked if my visa was in order. When I said, "Yes", he directed me to the empty air crew desk where I was quickly processed by an agent more interested in a conversation with his friend. Our driver David would later tell me that immigration was usually pretty relaxed here.

I waited quite some time for the bags studying the crowds. As with many warm country airports there wasn't much separation from the baggage handling area. I could see and smell the diesel luggage tractor and I would soon learn that this 'perfume' is a frequent part of Kenyan life. Curiously, there were few smokers anywhere. Perhaps it is too costly.

At Customs, the agent looked at my two large bags and asked if I was on vacation. I decided to be open and honest, and explained that I had a bag full of children's clothes for an orphanage with which our church is associated. He asked my profession and I said 'minister'. It may be that this was the first time that admission ever greased the wheels for me, or maybe he just had a kindly heart. He explained that he was supposed to charge me a 50 % duty on the used clothes (new clothes are only 25 %) Apparently used clothes sales are a thriving industry. He passed me through.

Outside I am met by David Usher, Josphat and Nancy from the Kenyan UU Church in Nairobi , our host team. We quickly loaded the car and I was ushered to the front seat where I met David, our driver, a man about my age. We all piled in to a small but serviceable old Toyota with some bags on laps and off we went.

It was already 20 degrees (warm for a Canadian in winter) and climbing as we headed west on Mombassa Road passing those same factories I had seen from the air. Hundreds of people lined both sides of the road, walking on paths and on the red dust of the shoulder. Most were on their way to work. For those going farther

there were flocks of white and often uniquely decorated mini busses. They more or less follow a route, stop anywhere, pack people in as best they can and charge flexible fares. They are the cheapest form of transportation. This day they also seemed to be the most omnipresent. My favourite was the one with a large NBA silhouette decal on the back window showing a stunt basketball shot. Bolted to the roof was an old basketball net and ball swaying in the breeze.

The most obvious aspect of life in Nairobi are the people. Aside from the numbers streaming along the roadside, there are the street vendors dodging traffic and selling everything from newspapers to fruit to toys to car accessories. There are also a goodly number of bicycles, mostly of Chinese manufacture. Within 15 minutes we are stuck in a nasty traffic jam and move slowly through it. Traffic cops are few and far between, stop lights almost non-existent and vehicles move in an ever changing pattern of four or five imaginary lanes (some on dirt shoulders) with a mixture of courtesy and courage. The streets are filled with workers, most nicely dressed. The Kenyans are a handsome people. Closer to the city center there are fruit stands and other mini-market shanties lining sections of the roadways. We pass a golf course, where no one was playing, and the football stadium. Life seems normal. All kinds of architecture are evident, some old, some new, shanties here and there. It's all jumbled together, but it doesn't seem messy to me. It's more a reflection of a people who are used to either going ahead on their own or just figuring out how to get by as best they can.

I am getting to know David, since I am in the front seat, although Josphat joins the conversation now and then. David patiently answers my questions, and asks many in return about global politics, Canadian immigration patterns and a host of other topics. It's a pleasant and relaxed conversation, although everyone in the car has a lot to say about the upcoming American elections. It is the dawn of Super Tuesday in the US primaries and we're all wondering how Obama will do. Obama has a Kenyan father, so they are pulling for him. He also seems to be the most promising candidate to them.

As we talk of Kenya , we don't get into the specifics of who supports which side in the dispute, but David says quietly, "It will be okay. We are a people used to many divisions. We talk about them. We know how to disagree and how to agree to disagree and still be friends. It will take time, but we will be okay." I certainly feel no anxiety from the welcoming team, beyond that of their concerns for organizing an event of this magnitude.

After a good hour and a half of driving and chatting, we finally arrive at the Methodist Guest House on top of a hill. It has a gated and guarded entrance, and several friendly guards patrolling inside. Theft seems to be a significant problem. On most cars, for example, everything that can be stripped by street boys has the

car's licence number etched on it... the mirrors, tail lights, windows etc. David explains that it is a security measure.

We meet up with faculty members Jill McAllister , Rosemary Bray-McNatt and Vincent Desroches and check in. The staff is friendly, welcoming and well-uniformed. David and I get settled in our nicely appointed European style room and head down for tea on the inner courtyard verandah. It's a covered yet open area with couches and a few tables and a polished stone floor. Tea is served here twice a day and after supper. There is a small green area with a couple of blooming bushes and a small tree or two. I think it will become my favourite place as it's shaded and seems to draw a constant breeze.

For lunch we went up the road a few hundred metres. Again we passed a number of the road side stalls. Some seem more permanent, others nothing more than a scrap of canvass on poles. One is devoted to bicycle repairs with a variety of well used parts. A couple of food stands have braziers going for roasting corn. This isn't tourist stuff, but a way for poorly paid workers to get a bite when they can.

The wee mall has an open courtyard. There is a grocer, a fruit market and a butcher. There is a stationary store with not much in it, a tailor shop with about a dozen men making dresses. There are two cell phone stores. Cell phones are an industry here. Most of the advertising posters are devoted to this business. It's the primary form of communication. After a browse at the restaurants (Alabama with fried chicken, a Thai place and a local eatery), we finally settle on a delightful bakery with open air seating. Lunch is an assortment of foods running from roast chicken dinner to chapattis and samosas, small quiches. I have a tiger sandwich, a sub with a breaded meat kebab...and a chocolate donut.

The afternoon is given to naps. Jet lag caught up and I fell into a deep dreamless sleep for three hours. Dinner is at the guest house buffet and very well done. Chicken soup, buns, steamed arrowroot, green beans, sauted cabbage, fries, chicken balls, breaded pork cutlets and beef stew are the mains. We all avoid the salads because of water concerns, but have watermelon and mango for dessert (Fruit with peels are safe). After tea on the verandah we spend an hour assembling packets and then to our mosquito netted beds.

[ICUU Kenya Leadership School Day 2](#)

Kenya Day Two

Someone once said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. As I write this blog, I grow ever more aware that my own knowledge about life and politics in Africa does not even qualify me as a neophyte. Issues and concerns in this place run deep and span generations. As someone from a wealthy first world nation

where peace and a reasonable degree of prosperity is taken for granted, I have no way of beginning to comprehend the undercurrents at play in a place like Kenya. It is a little like standing before a lake one has never seen before and having no way of knowing what lies beneath the surface waters. The waters may appear calm, rippled or stormy. The waters I can't see may be deep, shallow, rocky and dangerous or smooth and sandy. I just don't know.

And so Day Two begins in Kenya fresh and bright and optimistic as I stare at the calm surface. By day's end some conversations reveal some of those underwater dangers and I go to sleep uneasy again.

The ICUU Leadership School faculty spends a couple of hours after breakfast preparing for the program. We then used a half day of free time to see a bit of Nairobi. Four of us hired a van to take us to the David Sheldrick Trust, a small area next to the enormous wildlife park. The Sheldrick area is devoted to rescuing orphaned elephants and rhinos. I am amused for these are the two creatures featured in the Babar cartoons – favourites of my two daughters.

We drive for perhaps 40 minutes to get there. It is not far beyond city limits. We skirt the Kibera slums, home to some 685,000 souls, the largest slum in the world. It has been the scene of the worst violence in Nairobi with many deaths in past weeks. From a distance it is a valley of rusting, corrugated roofs. Culturally and experientially it is as far away from this first world innocent as the moon.

As we skirt the edge of the city we see people casually walking along the side of the road, well dressed as they herd goats and cows, tend roadside gardens or stand waiting for busses. As we reach the shelter area we turn off at a gate guarded by a small pack of baboons and warthogs. Inside the gate we see a pretty young woman in fatigues armed with a binder and an AK-47 rifle. After a few pleasant words with our driver we head off over a remarkably rocky road. About a kilometre later we arrive at the shelter. We're hoping the rifle is protection against wildlife.

By the time the 11-Noon program starts we are joined by about 50 other tourists. We are led down to a clearing where five young elephants aged four to 18 months are being bottle fed. They take mud and dirt baths, play with the keepers and themselves and are as adorable as one might expect. The presenter explains how each has been saved after poachers or natural disaster claimed the lives of their mothers. We learn much about the elephants and are touched by their plight. Later these five are sent into the wild for the day to learn how to exist in the world into which they will eventually be released. Three more come in to feed. They are all a little over two years old and starting to grow tusks. In a few months they will be returned to their natural habitats. The handlers are careful not to grow too close to the beasts or to let them become too attached to any human. It seems to be a good program. I am further reassured by the stability of it all.

There are also two rhinos on hand, but the presenter explains that they are emotionless creatures not needing the social interplay of the elephants. This makes them dangerous at all times and so we can only see them through stout pens. After, many buy souvenirs or become 'foster parents' to the creatures. It is a moving experience. More importantly it is a sign of how people here are doing great work trying to preserve some of the natural heritage of this beautiful land. We head back to town and to a shopping area – after all we are tourists today! The driver takes us to a mall that I find a little disappointing. It houses upscale stores that sell the same kinds of things I could find at home –electronics, furniture, clothing etc. I split off from the group and head off for an open air market across the street in search of more traditional African fare. I am not disappointed. It's a slow day and I am soon accosted and invited by many vendors, pursued in an intricate dance where they understand the steps and I don't. Hundreds of tin huts, perhaps 8 feet square are separated by pathways barely two feet wide. The sun overhead disappears altogether in the overhangs. Each vendor makes offers by punching numbers into a calculator, with the customer punching in counter-offers. No numbers are spoken aloud for fear that competition will know the prices discussed and the profits made.

I went in to the market knowing only that I would pay far, far too much for the things I needed. I left with a couple of bags half an hour later feeling that my faith had been rewarded – I had paid far too much! I didn't really mind. They needed the money more than I did and I only purchased what I wanted. I did have the presence of mind to insist that the final vendor show me the way out of the rabbit warren market as part of the deal!

In the afternoon, back at the Guest House, we returned to work, finalizing our schedules and plans. Our first participants would arrive that evening from Nigeria. We were joined by Patrice Curtis, an African American woman from California who had considerable experience with foreign aid and refugee matters. She is here as an observer for the UUSC. She and Vincent Deroches clearly have the deepest knowledge of African history and politics. Dinner that night was an education, and not an entirely happy one.

I won't try to rehearse their discussions, for I have neither the skill nor the knowledge base. Suffice it to say that the issues at play in the disputed Kenyan election are part of those deeper waters I do not understand. The question on day two is: How solid is the climate of peace in Nairobi? As we gather for our conference, the disputing leaders of Kenya are meeting with Kofi Annan and other negotiators searching out a long term solution. Some think a positive outcome will not be possible and that more unrest is in Kenya's future. I can't say, but I am more concerned than a day ago. Right now our hope is that the gentlemen keep talking through the end of our conference. That seems our surest guarantee. As I

read this, I feel a little selfish. The Kenyans are facing hard times and I am only worried about our 60 people. Whatever happens in the coming weeks, the Kenyans will have to live with the result. But as I watch the non-impact of international pressure by our governments, I am aware of my own powerlessness. Better, I guess, to focus on the safety of our group.

The one comfort is the stalwart friendliness of the Kenyans I have met. There are more stories of people protecting folks from other tribes than there are stories of atrocities. I look around me and feel truly safe among the people here. In a way that feeling of safety and the knowledge of what can be and has been doesn't make sense. It's unsettling.

I don't sleep so very well this night.

Kenya Day Three

Well, the best news today was that the only storms were of the thunder and lightning variety, which was kind of pleasant for a guy who hasn't heard the rain since the first Edmonton snowfall some months ago. Most of our participants arrived in good order today. A few did not make it, but for the kinds of ordinary reasons that usually prevent people from attending conferences. Things are still peaceful in Nairobi and most of Kenya.

The last group to arrive was the contingent from Kisi, the most embattled western part of the country. But their delays were of the normal traffic variety – which can be utterly fierce in Nairobi. They got here in fine fettle and great spirits.

Others arrived earlier, of course. At lunch I had a wonderful discussion with Rev. Adeyinka Matimojou of Nigeria about the nature of pastoral care. It seems we both like being with the dying and performing funerals. We found a common thread in our shared belief that the pastor needs to help the person and the family face the end of life honestly. "It is a time where there is only truth," he said. We both also see it as an honour and privilege to be with people in such times of vulnerable honesty. 'Deyinka and I found a connection across cultures and space.

The other lunch time conversation was with two social workers, one from Nigeria and the other from Kenya. As I listened to them talk about the amazing projects they work at in all kinds of settings, I grew curious. "In Canada, we have social problems, but nothing like the challenges you face with incredible poverty and unemployment, not to mention the HIV/AIDS epidemics. How do you keep hope alive?"

"You have to be a fighter," said Olufemi, Adeyinka's brother "You can't do this work if you aren't willing to fight. It has to be a calling, and it is the call that sustains you."

I began to sense that this would be a rich week of discovery in both directions, and conversations unlike any I had ever had before. Perhaps I was discovering that this one westerner didn't always have the answers...a fault I have been known to possess. Later in the day I would sit awhile with Moses, a young farmer from Kisi. He wanted to know in detail what kinds of crops we grew in Alberta and how long our growing season was and how our farmers managed. He was more than amazed when I told him about Guy who runs the ranch my wife's family owns in Alberta. Guy is a good and hardworking rancher, but is far from wealthy. Moses could barely believe that a man who ran a herd of 100 cows could be anything but rich. "It is one of the inequities of my country," was all I could say.

After supper we went into the opening worship. Everything was done in French and English, for our school includes eight francophone Unitarians from Burundi and Congo-Brazzaville. Vincent Desroches has generously come over from Michigan in order to translate. I think he deserves a medal, for live translation is an exhausting art. I stumbled through my own parts of the service translating my own words into French. No one laughed, so I guess I did okay. Next came Kenyan entertainment laid on by our Nairobi UU hoists. There was a young, but gifted musical group who played, sang and danced their ways into our hearts. Then a young girl stood and recited a lovely poem about Unitarianism from her church that I hope to reproduce in a future edition.

I was deeply moved by the welcoming speech of Ben Macharia, the Chair of the Kenyan Unitarian Universalist Council in Nairobi. Though I cannot reproduce it all, here are some of his thoughts:

"This leadership conference, the first in our country, comes at a time when our country has witnessed and is still witnessing violence of unprecedented proportions. Even as we meet to share ideas on the future of UUism in the world, an estimated more than 1000 Kenyans have lost their lives in the senseless slaughter that marked the aftermath of the disputed December , 2007 elections. More than 30,000 Kenyans have become refugees in their own country...

"But all this notwithstanding, we are excited that this important conference which marks a milestone in the growth of UUism in Africa has taken off in an atmosphere of tranquility and brotherhood. It is a testimony to the resilience of the people of Kenya...

"I wish to note here that in this trying time, KUUC was not left behind in the massive humanitarian effort aimed at alleviating the plight of the internally displaced. We have chipped in where we could by donating whatever items we collected, be they clothes or food items.

"As far as the conference is concerned we wish to thank the organizers and the financiers for their efforts in ensuring that everything was done to make it a success. We also wish to thank all the foreign and local participants for their faith in this beautiful land and its people.

"My dear brothers and sisters, this leadership conference takes place against the backdrop of what happens when brother turns against brother and people who have lived together suddenly turn against each other in a senseless orgy of violence.

"It is our hope that this conference will explore the role of UUism in engendering equity and lasting peace among peoples of the world – that it will live up to our principle of promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We pray that as we continue our search for truth and meaning, we shall get nearer to our desired goal of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all, words that are also echoed in our national anthem."

As a UU minister, I have been preaching the Principles ever since they first came into being. I have always loved them, and tried to live by them. Never was I so moved by those words. Never did they seem so real, so hopeful and so powerful. All I could think was, "Amen, Ben."

There was a good feeling in the air as we broke up, mixing with the varying degrees of travel weariness of the participants. Many pictures were taken, hugs and handshakes shared. But tomorrow's 7 a.m. worship (groan) comes early. Most headed for bed...besides, the Methodist Center doesn't allow alcohol on site. That sure slows the partying down a bit!

We have begun in earnest.

P.S. Thanks to so many of you from all around the world for your kind wishes and responses to this blog. I have been sharing them. We are all finding them a great support and encouragement.

Kenya Day Four

Today began early for many of us – somewhere around 4 a.m. I am afraid it was a case of the neighbourhood erupting with the sounds of violence. Fortunately for all involved it was only a long and drawn out fight between cats staged atop the garbage can battlefield. The echoing sounds of struggle could be heard for quite some time. ☺

Usually such nocturnal events don't disturb my sleep for more than a moment or two, but this week is different. My brain is so busy with thoughts about this new to me world exploding like popcorn. Sleep was done for the night, so I grabbed my laptop and retreated to our bathroom to write yesterday's blog. I didn't want my typing to disturb my roommate David Usher. I already give him enough reasons to dislike me! Just kidding. We are good roommates.

I'm writing this blog early in the morning again, but David is awake and preparing for his presentation on Worship, so at least I am more comfortable at the desk. We will both be presenting today. I'll let you know how it goes tomorrow.

Our more formal conference activities began with a pre-breakfast worship at 7 a.m. in our spacious and bright meeting room on the second floor of the Guest House. One side is marked by a wall of windows looking out over the rooftops towards a grove of trees highlighted by a tall eucalyptus tree. The Burundian contingent led the brief service that featured music, meditation and a brief scriptural passage and reflection. We all then piled into the dining hall downstairs and across the courtyard.

The food here this week has been plentiful and good with a nice variety that serves the needs of vegetarians and omnivores alike. Breakfast is usually English style with bacon, sausage, eggs (you can also get made to order omelettes), potatoes toast and fruit. Lunch and dinner includes salads, some kind of cream soup, at least two starches like rice and noodles or potatoes, steamed vegetables of some variety and at least two and even three kinds of meat, chicken, pork and fish served breaded, roasted or stewed. The chef has a nice hand with the spices and people have been eating well. Dessert is usually fruit: bananas, pineapple and watermelon. At tea breaks the kitchen usually provides some baked loaves and fritters. No one is going hungry this week.

At 8:30 Rev. Jill McAllister began with a discussion of definitions of religious terms that provoked a good deal of discussion. In the second half of the morning Rev. Rosemary Bray-McNatt covered a great deal of the development of Unitarian history and theology. Both programs were content-rich, but the excellent and focused questions which followed suggested that the participants were hungry for such information and highly knowledgeable about religion in general. It was personally interesting to see how the questions and comments grew out of the different experiences of the different national groups. In each nation Unitarianism has been overlaid on top of a slightly different religious experience. Burundi is primarily a Catholic country while Kenya was most recently served by English missionaries. By contrast the strongest undercurrent in Congo-Brazzaville is still the animist religions of ancient Africa. As each national group tries to refine the place of Unitarian Universalism in their country, very different questions arise. Watching the process unfold is fascinating.

The ICUU intends to start circulating the brief foundational papers from this school as well as regular (monthly or perhaps more frequently) papers on various theological, historical, organizational and worship-related topics. Keep an eye out for word of this new service in the next few months.

The afternoon was set aside for free time, networking and follow up conversations. Several faculty members wound up listening to the story of one young man in distress. Although he was not near the violence, his family in the Eldoret area was displaced by the troubles. The killings have clearly had a searingly deep impact on him. He is struggling to find understanding and a reason for hope... and a reason not to hate. Later I sit silently with him by the pool and play with my camera. I have a photo of him that captures the brooding pin. I won't speak for my colleagues, but I know I feel inadequate. There is little I can do but listen. At the suggestion of one skilled member of our team, we are trying to connect him with the trained Kenyan therapists that are part of our school, feeling he can be better helped by his own people.

I mentioned the pool. The Methodist Guest House is equipped with a lovely 25 meter outdoor pool and a children's pool as well. Today was sunny and bright and the water was refreshing for this lad from northern climes. Several of the participants joined us. There was a lot of splashing and laughing and several impromptu swimming lessons.

Late in the afternoon we hold our first Covenant Group sessions. The participants have been divided into small groups of six or seven (including one French speaking group). The faculty members serve as facilitators. Many in North America UU circles will be familiar with the small group ministry format. There is a brief liturgy designed to get us thinking about a certain topic for the day. The purpose is to encourage deep listening to one another's stories.

As a minister in North America, I seldom ever work with a group that is not mixed gender or even all female. It is rare that I work in the company of men. As it turns out my six group mates are all male and with five from different parts of Kenya and one from Nigeria. The topic is nature and the sharing is rich. In fact most of us kept talking after the formal session was over. I felt lucky. In the evening the ICUU Executive Director John Clifford gave a presentation on the structure of the ICUU. Four of the five national groups are either emerging or pre-emerging groups in the ICUU, so the primer was a useful necessity. John also shared a delightful variety of slides from his collection of our communities around the world. Later the Nigerian and Burundian groups shared something of their history. The Burundians is quite new to Unitarianism, but the Nigerian church has been operating since the 19th century.

The day concluded with worship directed by the Ugandans including a witty homily from Mark Kiyamba. Most of us headed quickly to bed. It had been a long day.

We prayed for a night of peace amongst the feline population.

Posted by Brian Kiely at [19:27 0 comments](#)

Friday, 8 February 2008

Kenya Day 5

It had to happen. It was waiting to happen. During Saturday evening worship it finally was unleashed in all its joyful splendour. Eight Kenyan men and women from the Kisi stood at the front and unleashed a passionate and powerful song that had everyone singing and soon after, dancing. In the classic call and response style the high soprano voice washed over us like a cool and refreshing rain on a hot day supported by strong bass and baritone rhythms. In seconds we were clapping. In minutes we were dancing and euphoria swept the room. What a wonderful close to the day!

Of course, the start of the day had been pretty nice as well. The cats did not disturb the night this time. I woke early and was ready for the day about 6:30 a.m. Here, just a degree below the equator, day and night are equal. Daylight shines from 7 to 7. I collected a strong black Kenyan coffee from the dining room and wandered to the upper verandah and watched the sun leaped into the sky just beside the giant eucalyptus in the distance.

And it also had been a deep and challenging day rich with power and moments of meaning. In our early session I had the privilege of leading a section on church structure and organization. African Unitarian Universalism is a mix of ages and stages. Congregations in South Africa and Nigeria date back to the 19th century. But in Uganda, Kenya, Congo-Brazzaville and Burundi, our liberal faith is a brand new presence on the religious scene. These newer groups have formed since 2000 and some as late as 2004. Many of them first learned of our religion from the internet.

Bless Tim Berners-Lee (a Unitarian) for his wonderful invention of the worldwide web! These New UUs called to the International Council asking us to come and teach them more about what Unitarianism is all about.

Most of the people here are considered to be ministers by their people, but few have the formal training that we expect ministers to have in other parts of the Unitarian world. That's not a criticism of their ministries, just an observation of fact. None are paid. In fact, the most common question I received this week from these ministers was, "What do you do for a living?" They are amazed to learn of such a thing as professional paid ministry and that I not a farmer.

My new colleagues display a wonderful passion for their faith and are courageous in working to make it grow. Indeed, many in my world who could learn a lot about growing churches from them. For all that they have many needs to help them grow in ministry. "Lack of resources for study" does not begin to describe the condition here. They need books and articles and teachers to help them understand our history and approach to religion, for use in creating worship and for the development of leadership skills. ICUU Executive Director John Clifford brought a small suitcase of used books about our faith, some of them quite old. He laid them out and invited people to come and choose a book or two to take away. They were snapped up in minutes and carried like treasures.

With the novelty of the UU experience in many parts of Africa, and this lack of resources, a session on church structure seemed like a good idea. The ICUU will circulate a couple of short papers we produced before and during the conference on this topic, but in short I suggested that structures were shaped by the religions that came before, the social context in which the church exists and the understanding of God and faith in the community. But the most important factor includes the people who both create and shape the structure.

I did not speak for long. Instead I asked people to talk awhile amongst themselves about how these factors impacted their long standing or emerging communities. And then we had an open conversation. That's when it got very deep. Two main issues emerged. The first was the struggle of social context. To be blunt, nearly all of the participants are unemployed or are poor farmers working in a communal setting trying to get enough to eat. Kenya and its conflicts are in the news right now, but all of these nations have faced strife, exploitation, HIV/AIDS and poverty in recent years. The 'churches' here have to address those issues in some way almost before they begin if they are to have any credibility. I say 'churches' in quotes. Daniel from Kisi told me that his congregation meets under a shady tree outside the village. You can bet that makes regular worship tough in the rainy season! Other groups meet in restaurants or homes. Very few have church buildings of any sort. I am not sure I would have the strength of character to pursue religious leadership under such situations.

The second issue is even more deeply felt. Unitarianism is a new kind of thought, a new approach, a new faith in most of Africa. But Africa is a collection of cultures where elders are often revered and given an extraordinary amount of control over the affairs of the community. Perhaps half of the tension-laden conversation dealt with how to build something new in a place where new is not always welcome. It is a painful issue for the young ministers who are torn by their inbred respect for elders, and their passion for moving ahead with this new religious

venture. For them it's not just a matter of making change. They must find loving answers for a difficult situation.

The best I could offer was a North American analogy about the equality of women in our movement. In the 1970's, UU women came together and in gentle ways and harsh demanded their place at the table. That place was given grudgingly at first, but in time a new generation of 'elder' males grew up as supporters of change in a climate where women were perceived to be fully equal, and the struggle lessened. We suggested that these people in the room were the elders in training. When their time comes to assume that role, perhaps they would be the ones to let go the power.

The second session was focused on worship, led by Rev. David Usher. He encouraged a networking experience where people reviewed their worship practices in their communities and then shared them with the group. There is nothing like the exchange of ideas to spark new thought and new ways of doing things. The high point came when he asked us to recite the Lord's Prayer in our native languages.

I am continually amazed by the language issue here. We are conducting affairs in English and French, but almost every participant is working in a second (or third) language. I would guess that there are 10 different 'native tongues' being spoken among the 50 participants in the room. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more. Most Africans speak at least two and often as many as four languages. Hearing the Lord's Prayer spoken in so many ways was a powerful experience.

In the afternoon I had a little free time. As often happens at conferences like these days, it suddenly became urgent to go 'off campus' for an hour or so. I headed out into the local neighbourhood in search of more bottled water for our room. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the water in Nairobi is fine, but I am reluctant to take the chance. The consequence of guessing wrong would be unfortunate for me and the work here.

So I headed out on a Saturday afternoon to find a still crowded street in this mostly residential neighbourhood. Men, women and children were walking in numbers I usually only see at West Edmonton Mall. The street vendors were doing a good business selling corn cobs roasted over an open brazier, selling sodas and lottery tickets and a host of fruits and vegetables in tiny stalls. The businesses, including our guest house, all have uniformed security. The mini-busses scurried about honking with the bus-boys waving to see if I wanted a ride. Two police officers armed with cut down AK 47 rifles talked earnestly with a man in a late model car – a rare sight around here...the new car, not the police.

About a kilometre up the road I arrived at the little open air mall we visited on the first day. Now well past my jet lag, I looked around a little more and sat awhile under a tree reading a novel while enjoying a Coke (no Pepsi here!). Okay, there was the chocolate donut too... I wandered into the grocery and found my water and then noticed a very well-stocked liquor section. This is a well-to-do area of town. With the devil in my heart I purchased and smuggled a couple of bottles of wine into the dry Guest House in order to lubricate our nightly staff meetings. Sometimes it's sooo good to be bad!

After a few days together, relationships among participants and between participants and faculty are building. People are feeling safer with one another, and I am finding myself continually involved in ever-deepening and rich conversations, about religion, about vision, about struggles and about life. I am indeed fortunate to be here. I suppose that was underscored last night when I Skyped home and talked with my wife and daughters and learned that it is a brisk -30 Centigrade in Edmonton!

More tomorrow. Bye' from Nairobi!

Posted by Brian Kiely at [08:54](#)

Kenya Day 6

We are nearing the end of our ICUU Leadership Conference and the end of my time in Kenya, so this posting will focus on some of the differences I have observed here about how we understand and practice Unitarianism. (Apologies to my Universalist and UU friends. In Africa the name is Unitarian).

Ok well, first, one cultural observation: Mobile phones.

I thought North America was swimming in cell phones. I thought I was coming to a 'third world' country. (Experienced travellers know where this train of thought is headed). It is fascinating to see that in Africa where poverty is so rampant that everyone... EVERYONE has a mobile phone. Most poster advertising concerns mobiles. Every second store and booth sells phone cards, inexpensive phones and prepaid mobile time. And I must note that the one pay phone at our guest house never has a dial tone.

Of course this mobile revolution makes sense. It is the way the people here are able to communicate in a nation where landlines are few and far between and expensive to boot. Mobiles are cheap, effective and convenient. They bring a new freedom. Perhaps the explosion of this ease of communication both helped spark the recent violence, and helped provide the massive internal and international peaceful response to the violence. How many violent actions in the past in this continent have gone unnoticed because no one far away heard of the unrest?

My colleague, Rev. David Usher pointed out the other day that Samuel Morse (Morse code), Alexander Graham Bell (the telephone) and Tim Berners-Lee (the World Wide Web) each sparked a revolution in communications...and all were Unitarian. I guess that's really not a surprise. It is an unspoken principle in our liberal and questing faith that the more pathways of communication we have, the more information to we have, the better and more peaceful the world will be.

And I suppose that this brings me to the most interesting thing I have learned about Unitarianism in Africa.

In the weeks before the conference, Rev. Patrick Magara kept inviting us to come to Kisi, a place very close to where the worst violence took place. “No, No,” he would say, “Kisi is safe.” It was hard to believe. But then we came and discovered that for years Rev. Magara and others from the Kisi Unitarian congregations have travelled around the region speaking to people and groups having conflicts with one another. They have a history of peace-making. When their region went up in flames, that groundwork helped preserve the peace.

How to live our Unitarian Universalist faith into our daily lives is a challenge for many westerners and northerners face. We tend to go through our lives not announcing our religion to the world. In Kenya that kind of separation of faith and practice is literally unthinkable. Ask the Kenyan Unitarians about their church and they won't talk about worship or membership numbers. Instead they will tell you about the projects they do: the women's groups, the working cooperatives, the orphanages, the volunteer-run schools and so on. To be a Unitarian here is to be involved in the community in a faithful way. Take my new friend Cyrus Itare. He is a young man still in his 20's. He and his wife have a one month old child. He is unemployed (not unusual around here and while problematic, not a shameful thing). Oh, did I mention that he and his wife have taken *eight* orphan children in their home? I am in awe.

The last major difference between Kenyan Unitarians and the 'first world' UU's concerns the topic of growth. It's hard, exactly to say how many Unitarians there are in this country, but it is certainly over 500 in over 40 congregations. Five years ago, there were none... Zero.

Why so much growth so fast? Kenyan Unitarians are willing, eager to spread the word of their faith far and wide. Some preach in market places. Some talk to groups from other churches. There are many cases where entire congregations have 'converted' to Unitarianism. And then there is the outreach of their community programs. Anyone can participate, but they WILL hear about our faith. No one is forced to convert, but few who come in contact with Kenyan Unitarians will walk away not knowing something about us.

Good heavens! Conversion? Proselytizing? Unitarians doing that? Amazing.

But here's something worth thinking about: If their success continues, within a few years there will be more Unitarians in Kenya than in Germany, Canada or the UK. Wow!

And now, the commercial: These folks are growing fast and are hungry to learn. I mentioned in Blog post 5 that they snapped up a suitcase full of books on our tradition. Perhaps we could look around our churches and communities for Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist books that haven't been read for awhile. When I get home, I will start to explore how best to get those books to Africa. PLEASE DON'T SEND ANYTHING YET. Past experience has shown that a mailed book stands little chance of reaching its destination. But if you think you have a few books to contribute the cause, write to me personally (briekie@aol.com). I will keep track and then in a few weeks (more likely a few months) I will contact you about next steps.

Thanks,

Brian

Kenya Days Blog 7

The ICUU Leadership Conference ended last night with a great deal of hope and joy, with mutual gratitude, with hugs and singing...and with a trip to the open air bar just up the road. The faculty decided that everyone needed a treat. It was a wonderful party with more singing, lots of conversation, back slapping, handshaking and an enormous amount of good will. The Tusker beer, Pilsner and Guinness didn't hurt either. Speaking of cultural differences I saw a new one...Guinness and Coke. HmMMM.

The final day of work was given over to planning in local groups, a session on the structure and history of the ICUU, a discussion of ordination practices around the world which was of great interest. We also reviewed the Covenant Groups model.

Each day we met in the same small groups for a time of speaking and listening...not conversation, but speaking and listening respectfully. It is a structured practice used in many parts of the UU world. There is a chalice lighting, a brief time to check-in on how each person is doing, a shared reading on a topic of the day, a time of silence and then an opportunity for each participant to speak in turn on their views and feelings about the topic. This week the topics all had to do with that particular day's work. After all have had a chance to speak, there are a few moments for final comments and then a closing reading.

I happened to be part of an all male group, something I am not used to in a church setting. That may be why we gelled so quickly...or perhaps it was because Adeyinka Matimojou of Nigeria was part of our group. He is a happy, loving and passionate man who has been in such groups before and is always willing to start if needed and to share deeply. The other faculty told me their groups took longer to get going. None of us are sure why that was, but I will count myself fortunate. The time I spent with these six men was the richest part of my conference experience. From them I learned what life in Africa is like. Of everyone here, only Adeyinka is a full-time minister. The rest have to farm or work in the city. There are social workers, tradesmen, students, many farmers, journalists and business people. Some are working, some aren't. In return for their stories they now have learned a lot more about Canadian winter than they would ever wish to know! I don't think any is willing to try Edmonton at -40C.

We spoke of life and love, of farming and family, of hopes and dreams. We cried a little and laughed so much that one of the other groups asked us to quiet down. It is a memory that will not soon fade.

Late in the afternoon the groups reported back about their plans for the next five years. These people may have few resources, but they have amazing vision. While some national groups hope for regular meetings and a stable congregation, others are dreaming of small hospitals, schools, orphanages. As I was writing this, Sister Alice Magara showed me some photos of the Sarah's Orphans project in Kisi. They live in the region next to the areas with the most violence and have been swamped with displaced persons. Looking at the photo, there must be 50 orphans in their village right now needing food, clothes and medical supplies. She showed me photos of the

women's group making clothes for sale on some shared sewing machines, making soap from avocados and a host of other projects.

I guess my point is that they may have big dreams, and they will need help to realize them, but that's not stopping anyone from moving forward in city or country.

Today I am scheduled to visit with the Nairobi group and to see some of their projects. Tomorrow I start for home, so I expect this blog will have one more instalment.

Thanks for reading.

Brian

Posted by Brian Kiely at [05:45](#)

Kenya Day 8- Departure

Our Boeing 767 has just departed Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. It is mostly empty on its way to Amsterdam. I gaze out at the small farm plots dotting the dusty plains below and ponder my last day in Kenya.

In the airport I noticed a bookshop just beside my gate. It is, of course, geared to international travellers, but the selection of books chosen for the window display is intriguing. On lower shelves are a couple of tomes on getting rich and being successful, including the new religious version of same by Joel Osteen. On the upper shelves are the US political books. Bill Clinton's auto-biography and his book Giving on generosity towards the third world provide the bookends for the current editions about Hilary and Obama. Nothing appears about the Republican candidates. On the second shelf are a series of books about various African countries, mostly historically or politically inclined. But the most interesting thing is the center-piece. Pride of place is given to Shake Hands with the Devil, the account of the Rwandan genocide by the UN Commander and fellow Canadian (and national hero) Lt. General Romeo Dallaire. My heart swells a little. I have avoided this book until now. Having read enough of Dallaire's story in the papers and having seen the fictional account in Hotel Rwanda, I know it will be a rough ride. Placed so prominently it seems both like a bookseller's prayer of hope and a warning to Kenya. Rwanda was a peaceful place where genocide erupted in 1994, killing 800,000 and displacing millions more. The display seems to say, "Let us be careful...this could happen here. Let us return to sanity." I buy the book. I barely notice our departure for the tears filling my eyes and I haven't even finished the Introduction.

In this morning's papers, the Kenyan politicians seem to be playing at silly buggers again, but I have faith in the people I have met on the streets and in the

restaurants. Perhaps they are telling the westerner what he wants to hear, but the light in their eyes suggests to me that there is a widespread and genuine belief in Nairobi at least, that Kenyans are better than that. There will be peace and a political solution, if not this week, then in time.

Still, this 767 heading to Amsterdam is empty. The economy is in chaos and the tourist trade is gone for this winter. There is a column in the Nation newspaper today. It's one of those anonymously penned pieces by someone called The Watcher. Watcher relates a story. One or the other political leader (I think Mr. Odinga) spoke of the election in terms of having his cow stolen from him. But the Watcher quotes a wise head who commented, "They are arguing over who owns the cow and not noticing that they are trampling the grass on which the cow feeds. If there is no grass, there will be no cow." I only hope they realize this truth sooner rather than later. The people have figured it out. Why can't the politicians grasp it?

Yesterday was a free day for me. Earlier in the week Kevin Gesimba had asked me to come and visit his family about 30 km outside of town. I said I needed to do some gift shopping for my family. My wife had asked me to bring drums for my daughters. (I hope my ears don't live to regret that!) So Kevin and Shem took me first to the Masai market, a sprawling colourful conglomeration of blankets and displays with crafts, fabrics, jewellery, paintings, woodcraft and pretty much anything you can think of...and drums of course. We westerners sometimes lament the lack of service in our stores. No problem here! As I entered the area I suddenly had a dozen new friends who wanted to shake my hand and take me to their stalls. With my real friends doing the negotiating I found my few purchases and departed with far more shillings in my pocket than I had anticipated.

We booked a taxi and headed east to Kitangera Estates. The trip took nearly 90 minutes thanks to Nairobi's amazing and endless traffic. In today's paper experts estimated there would be total gridlock in 15 years. To my eye they are being wildly optimistic. I expect that a dozen more new cars will produce total gridlock in about 15 days!

To a westerner the word 'Estate' suggests something a little majestic and well to do...or at the very least something pretentiously hoping to be majestic and well-to-do. Kenyan Estates are, to privileged western eyes, anything but. Please understand, that this is an observation of difference and is not tinged with disrespect or even pity. In fact, I sense that Kenyans are happier in general than westerners. When everyone is poor, they don't suffer from the material lust and 'gotta have it' that plagues the west. They do have real wants and needs (unlike me with only my imaginary ones), but beyond that they focus on family, friends and mutual support.

Kevin's house is off the main dirt road, down a narrowish alley and then down an even narrower alley. Because of mud holes the taxi can get no closer than 100 metres. In Kevin's street, the alley is perhaps a dozen feet wide, each side lined

with a solid wall of brick abodes. We push through the metal door into a meticulously clean and comfortable room. There are three sofas spread on each of the other walls. Each sofa is covered with an embroidered seat cover. I would learn that this is Divinah's handiwork. She is Kevin's wife and a participant at the conference.

There is no cooking area, no washing area and no toilet or running water. There are just two rooms with a small window in each. Kevin extravagantly buys Fantas at the tiny store across the alley. He then goes and gets his sons, his nephews and a friend from school to bring them to meet me. I am already being kept company by Happiness and her daughter Eva, although I am not quite sure of the relationships here. Eva is six. I show them pictures of my girls and there are warm smiles all around. I am entranced by little Eva and long to kiss my girls.

The boys come tumbling through the door. There are formal handshakes, a little conversation, many pictures and then off they run back to class.

Kevin and Shem then take me into the other room hidden by a curtain. It is a bare cement room for storage and work. There are two sewing machines, a lovely old treadle style Singer and a newer portable. This is where Divinah does her work.

They hope to find financing to start a home based clothing business. We discuss details. It seems that the impossibly inaccessible sum of \$200 US or so would get them started. I have read about micro-loans, but this is the first time I have come in touch with the reality of what one can do. I think we can make this work.

It is a hope of mine that we will find a way to connect UU's from around the world in some way to help make these small subsistence dreams a reality. As I wrote in chapter 7, nothing is set-up yet, but I am hoping that will change in the months ahead.

Hours later after another long dusty drive, I connect with my remaining faculty colleagues back at the Guest House. For most of us this is our last time together until who knows when. We head out to a local restaurant for a final meal. We wind up at the Java Hut at the Nakumatt Center. Nakumatt appears to be the Kenyan Wal-Mart...perhaps is the Kenyan Wal-Mart. The Java Hut seems strangely out of place to me. Why? It's Starbucks decor in a land where nothing else looks that way. But the Swahilli curried Tilapia is an absolute delight and the chocolate ice cream (my first sweet since arriving) is heavenly. I think my stomach is ready to go home. I'll close this blog this way: I know this journey has changed me, but for now the feelings, sensations and friendships are too fresh for me to venture a guess as to how that change will sort itself out. I do know it will be harder to dismiss the Third World as 'them' anymore. I do know I will pay attention when I hear the word 'Africa' from now on. I am more convinced than ever that we in the West and the North will have to be prepared to make material sacrifices in order to bring economic justice to the world. It will not be enough to simply nod when politicians protecting national interests say that their economic policies will help the Third World and that rising economies will float all boats. Instead, I believe some real

redistribution of wealth will have to occur. If we don't manage that change, it may just happen to us we run out of resources and as the rest of the world, led by China and India find their power.

Thanks for reading this, friends. Thanks to those of you who have written and thanks for caring about our ICUU leadership school. It has been a transformative and unforgettable experience for us all.

Asante

Brian