

Providence or Dumb Luck? A Narrative of an African Journey

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I told the students that they would find Kenya to be different from Canada. Things do not always happen the way one would expect. Sometimes they happen more slowly. Sometimes, as one African writer has put it, "Things Fall Apart."¹ Africa, I told my students, appears to the western observer to run on rumours, connections and miracles.

My prophecy seemed to be coming true when the group of us, travelling from a Canadian seminary, Wycliffe College in Toronto, to visit Kenyan churches for six weeks, were not met at the airport by the people we were to be staying with – our itinerary never arrived. But some friends of friends heard we were coming, and they met us and helped us to arrange transportation into town. The rumours and the connections, perhaps even the miracles, had begun to work!

Our plan was to stay in a Kenyan theological college in Limuru, near the capital, Nairobi, for some days and then head off to different parish and ministry situations. This orientation time went well. We ate, talked and worshipped with students from at least six different countries. We learned a bit about their lives. We were given the use of a pickup truck, which helped us to see something of life outside of the college as well. For me the time was a mix of joy and sorrow. I had taught in this college for three years and so I had the joy of renewed acquaintances and the satisfaction of seeing how good things were happening. But Africa always has a sad edge: on the first day I was pleased to see the a former student named Zimulinda had come back to do further study, but as we talked I learned of the circumstances of his return. He is from Rwanda. For the last two years he had lived with his family in the refugee camp in Goma, Zaire. Finally he was able to get permission to come to Kenya to study. He had too many painful stories to tell me, especially of the death of another former student named Bilinda. Sometimes the miracles don't happen.

Soon the Canadian students began to disperse to various parts of the country to work in various churches: one to a Cathedral parish in a town, one to a rural church, one to a large urban congregation, one stayed in the college to do graduate research – and one, David French, went to a remote place called Kakuma.

I had made contact with Kakuma through a friend (another connection). Kakuma is in the north, in the middle of the desert where the Turkana people live, near to the border with Ethiopia and Sudan. There the U.N.H.C.R. runs a refugee camp for thousands of Sudanese, Somalis, Ugandans, Rwandese, Burundians and Ethiopians who have been displaced, usually by war. Until recently the camp was populated by about 20,000 Sudanese, but recent events have swelled the population. I could not get accurate figures, but rumours (!) put the number in the camp to between 30 and 50 thousand. David was to be the guest of the Episcopal [Anglican] Church of the Sudan in Kakuma. Most of the Sudanese Anglican in Kakuma are Dinka people, a proud nomadic group from southern Sudan. Their traditional ways of life have been almost totally decimated now by years of civil war with the government troops of the north. Many of the Dinka have become Christians in the last few years. It seems that the story of the Bible, and especially the story of the cross, gives meaning to their suffering like nothing else can.²

A colleague who accompanied us on the first part of our trip to Kenya, the Rev. Brian McVitty, had lived in Kenya before and knew Kakuma. So on the appointed day, Brian and David took the pickup truck and headed north. Kakuma is a two day drive from where we had been staying, but it took them three days. They had a breakdown on the first day, but after a 24-hour delay in Nakuru and a new water pump, they were back on the road. They spent a night in Eldoret with the requisite visit with the Bishop, and then a night in Lodwar. Lodwar is the last town before Kakuma, the site of the only patrol station, the only bank, the only place for supplies in the middle of the desert which stretches for hundreds of kilometres. Brian thought it important that David become oriented to Lodwar – just in case. The next day they reached the camp, and were welcomed with some surprise and much joy by the Sudanese Christians. They had been told that we were coming, but they really didn't believe that someone from the west would

actually want to come. But soon the “guest hut” was made ready. Brian stayed the night and then left David in the capable hands of the Rev. John Machar, the Rural Dean of Kakuma refugee camp. They need a Rural Dean in Kakuma, because there are so many Anglicans. Of approximately 20,000 Sudanese in the camp, 12,000 are Anglican Christians. They have five parishes, further divided into about 50 smaller groups.

Brian visited some friends near Eldoret for a few days and then returned to Limuru, where he gave me the truck. Brian headed back to Canada. The day after Brian flew out I went to Nairobi to do some business. On the way in I noticed to my horror that the headline of one of the newspapers (The Standard) was "26 Killed in Refugee Camp." I reasoned to myself that it could not be Kakuma. The camp had been there for four years with no violence; other refugee camps in East Africa had been having trouble, especially those in and around Rwanda and Burundi. But of course I had to be sure so I bought a paper. Sure enough, it was Kakuma. A two day gun battle between rival Sudanese groups, the paper said; 26 dead, 80 or more injured. I tried to compose myself. This had happened 2 days before. The paper said there was now order in the camp. No Canadians were mentioned in the report. It would take at least 2 days to drive to Kakuma. The first order of business was to contact the Canadian High Commission. I had a cold conversation with an official at the Commission who assured me that the paper was wrong, only nine had been killed and there had not been a gun battle – the U.N. does not let the refugees keep guns in the camp. No Canadians had been hurt. A Canadian official was going up that day to assess the situation. They were going to get the “facts” instead of just “rumours.”

Back in Limuru I tried to contact Bishop Stephen Kewasis in Eldoret. No answer. In chapel the next morning I asked for, and received, assurance of the prayers of the college community. After prayers I managed to reach the Bishop, who immediately said to me, "What are we going to do about David in the camp?" He told me that he would get someone to take him out. I felt relieved. The camp was calm, David was unhurt, and someone was going to get him out. I could go up and get him from Eldoret or Lodwar in a few days.

In the meantime I had been concerned about another student in a parish near Mount Kenya who had contracted a persistent case of diarrhea. It was an overnight trip in another direction, but with David safe, or so it seemed, I felt I had better retrieve her. Two days later I was ready to head north to get David. A German student in Limuru, Edzard Albers, wanted to go with me and I was glad to have the company. The student who had been doing research in Limuru, Stephanie Douglas, was to accompany me to Nakuru. We headed off in thick fog and steady drizzle. It took all morning to get to Nakuru and then all afternoon to get to Eldoret. At the Bishop's house in Eldoret, Kewasis informed me, to my relief, that he had sent the Vicar of Lodwar to get David from the camp. I slept well.

The next day we headed into the desert – from the cold rainy of 7,000 feet above sea level in the highlands to the 40 degree heat of the desert. The road through the desert is quite good. It was built well and doesn't get a lot of traffic. The main problem in rainy season are the “loggias,” dips built into the road to let the water run through. Sometimes these dips back up and you have to wait in the desert for a day or so while the water recedes. There are about thirty of these loggas. About 100 kilometres into the desert Edzard and I drove up to the second loggia. Sure enough it was wet – about knee deep in water and mud, an overturned bus forming a dam keeping the water in the dip. About fifty local Turkana people, mostly children, were using the bus as a diving board into the muddy river and waiting for the next vehicle to come and get stuck. Happened to be us. Two other trucks were there. They had made it through the water, but had broken a gear box. The truckers had spent the night and were waiting for the replacement part. We started across the dip, but the back wheel skidded into deep mud and we couldn't move. Edzard told me later that he thought we would die there. No amount of pushing by the Turkana people would move the pickup, so I started gathering rocks. Soon the local folks and the truckers joined in. After about an hour gathering stones we got out of the water and headed off. I offered the truckers a ride to Lodwar but they declined. One of their number would return soon with the needed part.

We reached Lodwar by mid-afternoon. We were tired and hot and anxious to see David. We found the Anglican church and the Vicar. Yes, the Bishop had asked him to collect David, but the vehicle was broken, so he didn't go. He didn't try to fix the vehicle, he didn't try to get another, he just didn't go. I could

feel my temperature rising even higher than it had been. "We're going now," I said. Having filled the gas tank, the three of us headed out of town towards the camp. But once again we were prevented. Just out of town there is a bridge over a usually dry river bed. But it was rainy season and the river was over the bridge. "How long will this last," I asked the Vicar. "Until tomorrow."

Edzard and I delivered the Vicar home and found accommodation at a local conference centre. I felt helpless. Edzard's prayers helped somewhat, but between the heat and the worry I anticipated some sleeplessness. After dinner, Edzard and I sat watching the sun go down over the desert. Suddenly I saw something unexpected (the unexpected was becoming a regular occurrence by now!) – a young boy, about ten years old, with blond hair, riding his bicycle through the desert. "Look!" I said. Within a minute or so a landrover followed him with a whole family of white folks. So we followed. Westerners in this part of Africa would surely welcome a visit.

The family, Stephanie and Glen Hunt and their three children, was from New Zealand, missionaries working with a group of local churches. We had a wonderful time. We told them our troubles, they shared their experiences and warned us to watch for scorpions – the rain was bringing them out and they had treated a few people, and brought one or two others to hospital. It was a serendipitous meeting which settled my emotions somewhat.

At 7:00 the next morning Edzard, the Vicar and I were on the road to Kakuma. The water was still over the bridge, but it wasn't as high, so we got through. About halfway through the 120 kilometre journey I noticed that we were using a lot of petrol. In fact, by the time we reached the camp we had used more than half a tank. Even with the spare can we had just half a tank. At the same level of consumption, not enough to get back to Lodwar. But first things first. At the gate of the U.N. compound I explained that I was there to pick up a Canadian who had been staying as a guest of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan. I was told to sign in, and that I did not need to come back to the office. The hut where David was supposed to be staying was about four kilometres into the camp. To my great relief we were greeted by John Machar, a very healthy looking David, and a large group of his new Sudanese friends.

After a lengthy round of greetings we sat down to hear the unfortunate story of the violence that had erupted in the camp the week before. The root of the problem, it seemed, was that the food distribution system had changed. The previous U.N. administrators had had the wisdom to use the system of traditional elders in order to distribute food. Food was left by the U.N. at each of the zones and the elders made sure it was distributed fairly. For four years there had been no problems. But the new administration of the camp was concerned that some food was being sold outside the camp to local Turkana people. This seems to be true, but it was the only way that the refugees could acquire the wood they needed for building shelters. The huts made by the refugees have a framework made of sticks which is then plastered with mud and polished. The new camp administration built a food distribution centre and gave every refugee a card. Everyone had to collect their own food by lining up in the sun. One day, shortly after David's arrival, the food ran out. One group of Sudanese blamed another group. Someone pulled out a knife and a fight started. The U.N. called in the Kenyan Armed Forces and they started shooting. The Canadian official in Nairobi was right – the refugees do not have guns. The shooting went on for two days. All of this took place 500 meters from where David was staying. The Dinka knew of six of their number who had been killed. They did not know how many Nuer had died. Some were killed with traditional spears, some with bullets. The Kenyan papers knew nothing, or at least said nothing, about the army's involvement.

The fact that the U.N. had messed up meant that David was no longer welcome in the camp. But he had no way out, nowhere to go. And actually he did not want to leave. The Sudanese Christian community had welcomed him and he didn't want to leave them, just because it was uncomfortable. In fact when I said that we had to leave that day, there was some opposition from our hosts. We had, however, been told to sign out. However, there was still this issue of the petrol. John Machar thought that he might be able to help. David packed; we loaded up the truck and headed back to the U.N. compound. There we went to the Lutheran World Federation office. The person in charge there was very welcoming and helpful. He got on his walkie-talkie and tried to find some petrol for, but everyone, it seemed, had diesel vehicles. Finally he reached a man who had a car with a bit of petrol in the tank. If we agreed to take his

driver to Lodwar to get more petrol, we could have what was in the tank, which, it turned out was about five litres of (very bad tasting) gasoline.

With what seemed like enough gas to get us to Lodwar, Edzard, the Vicar, David, John Machar (who was now coming with us to visit his family in the Kenya highlands), and the driver, left the camp. We drove slowly into Kakuma town (about 1-1/2 kilometres from the camp, and started across the desert. Soon, however, it became evident that there was a problem. I couldn't get the truck over 30 kilometres an hour - and I could smell something burning. We turned around. By the time we got back to the U.N. compound we were pushing the truck. Thankfully the L.W.F. had a mechanic, who happily informed me that he was an Anglican himself (I guess the fact that Edzard, the Vicar, John Machar and myself all had collars on tipped him off).

"It's your clutch plate."

"Can you fix it?"

"Yes, but I don't have the piece."

"Where can I get one?"

"Maybe Lodwar....maybe Nairobi."

It was evident that this would be a big job. We decided that David, Edzard would go back into the camp with John. The Vicar and I would wait for the mechanic and his helpers to get the piece out so that I could match it to a new one in Lodwar...or Nairobi. I also needed a way back to Lodwar. A while later the driver who had given us the petrol came back for it – fair enough, we weren't using it. I helped him siphon it out of our truck and pour it into his car. His boss came by so I asked if he knew anyone who was going to Lodwar. He did. He had two trucks sitting in Kakuma town right then, and they were just about to leave. We might be able to convince them to wait. His driver took me into town and convinced the truckers to wait. Back in the compound the process of getting the clutch plate out of this 1988 Datsun was painfully slow. By 5:00 in the afternoon I could wait no longer. It was getting dark and the trucks would not stay in town forever. I gathered all the vehicle specifications I could find, found a lift to town, took the Vicar and off we went. The trucks were still there. It was only after I got into one of the trucks that I realized that these were the same truckers that had been broken down at the river when we stuck the day before. I had offered them a ride. They had remembered, so they waited. (Later, when I told Brian the story, he said, "There's a lesson there!" Indeed.)

We reached Lodwar just before dark. We were let off at the petrol station, about a kilometre from the church and about four kilometres from the conference centre. The Vicar and I had walking no more than 100 meters when Glen and Stephanie and their family (remember them) drove up. "Want a lift?" I told them about the petrol and the clutch plate and the truckers. They offered me supper and a bed, help finding the part the next morning and a tow back to Lodwar if the part couldn't be found. I felt a bit guilty having a shower and a good meal with the Hunt's that night, having left David and Edzard (and upwards to 50,000 others) in the camp, although I found out later that the Dinkas were so glad to have David back for one more night that they had a huge feast!

The next morning Glen and I went to the three auto part places in Lodwar. There were two clutch plates in town – neither was the right fit. Then Glen said, "You know the last missionaries who lived in our house left some old parts in the shed – let's just check." There under (literally) an inch of dust was a 1988 clutch plate – a Nissan clutch plate. Not a new one, of course, but good enough to keep for an emergency – or a miracle! Glen and I arrived in Kakuma just before lunch break. The mechanic said the plate would fit, so we went to find David and Edzard. They weren't at the guest hut because David was taking pre-wedding pictures. We found each other eventually and exchanged stories.

There was one more miracle before we left the camp. The mechanic and his crew worked all afternoon to get the clutch plate into the truck. In spite of all that had happened my faith was still a bit lacking – I began

to worry about the bill. After all, this mechanic could set whatever price he wanted. I started to hide my money in the luggage, in my socks – so I could show him the relative poverty of my wallet and pay him what I considered a fair price. At about 5:00 pm he told me that it was time for a test drive. He drove. The truck worked fine. After driving through town and around the camp a bit we went back to the compound. He turned off the truck, handed me keys and said, "Have a nice safari" and walked away. Well, I didn't want to be cheated, but I did want to give him something! So I followed him. "I have to pay you," I said. His reply I will never forget: "Jesus will pay me in the resurrection." Indeed.

In the western world we can usually understand "rumours" and "connections." Miracles give us a bit more trouble. I don't know if the events of this trip should be classified as miraculous. Some would call them luck, some would say they were coincidental. And if miracles do happen, and if the events we experience were somehow miraculous, then I also don't understand why some other miracles have not taken place. My Sudanese friends pray for peace everyday, but there is no peace in the Sudan. But maybe God gave us "the miracle of the clutch plate" because God wants the story of the suffering of the Sudanese to be told. Just before I left the camp, an old Sudanese woman came up to me and said something in Dinka. John Machar explained that she had a message for me. I asked him what the message was. "She says, 'When you go back to Canada, tell the Christians in Canada to pray for peace in the Sudan.'"

Footnotes

¹ The title of a novel by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe.

² See Marc R. Nikkel. "The Cross of Bor Dinka Christians: a working Christology in face of displacement and death," *Studies in World Christianity* 1/2 (1995), 160-185. Marc was my "connection" in Kakuma. He lived and worked in the Sudan from 1980 until his death from cancer in the year 2000. His article examines the hymns which Dinka Christians have written during the war, hymns which reflect their suffering, their questions, and their desperate grasp of faith in Jesus.

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