



(the last) Letter from Mwanza, Tanzania

I Corinthians 3:7-9

July 2009

Greetings,

This is, as I wrote up at the top, the last letter from Mwanza to come from my desk. The first thing I would like to do in this letter is to thank all of you for your support all these years. My wife Jan and I have been grateful for your prayers, gifts, letters, emails, special packages for the boys, and financial support that has kept us here all this time. It is a great place to be when we are receiving the blessings of others in order that we might be involved in this ministry.

In the time that we have been in Mwanza we have come to know many good friends. They gave us a very nice farewell open house at the end of April. We have some very special gifts from that time and we miss those friends and the times we shared in Mwanza.

I also had some great final visits to the communities where the partners I worked with these six years have their work. Some people have told me that I appear to be pretty comfortable speaking in front of people. That may be. But I tell you what, speaking in front of a group small or large when it's the final words of farewell is another story. It is hard to sum up in a few pages the reflections that I have toward the work and changes that we have seen over the years with communities and families. But I will try.

The first link in the chain has been the willing spirit and committed attitude of the three development officers that I have worked with continuously: Mr. Evarest Pamba, Joseph Shigulu, and Dotto Maingu. They deserve the credit because they were the ones that owned the learning we did together, made it theirs, and then took it to the field. There they put it into better Swahili than mine or into Sukuma and gave it to the men and women participants of Magu, Sengerema, Mwanza, and now Tabora.

The second link in the chain then is from these three development officers to the households where the participants live and make decisions that change their lives. I imagine that once training took place or the meeting was held there were hours of discussion and then finally a decision to join this group or that group. In each case people decided that they believed that something in their life could change. Paul writes about renewing your mind and I think that has a lot to do with the attitude change required for community development to take off. Someone needs to believe in you, and then you need to believe in yourself. And finally one needs to give it a try. We can do this because at the very beginning God believes in us and loves us. He wants to redeem our lives and everything in them to him, for his glory. Pushing back some of the despair of life in Tanzania allows more of God's grace and hope to flow into the hearts and lives of the people living in rural villages spread out across the land. It was a privilege to be able to join them on their journey.

Another link for me I believe was the support I found from friends and colleagues in CRWRC and in Mwanza. I had some good friends who I was able to talk with about many things and the insights I gained from them as they listened were invaluable.



Uvimwa members pose for a photo after a two-day meeting to learn about community development.

And finally, we actually saw some great successes which I have written about in the past newsletters: conservation agriculture (mashimo), the INADES education classes that people took on their own, the savings and credits organizations that were formed and grew steadily into solid community-based financial engines, the very helpful and expansive learning we had during our exchange visits to Malawi, Zambia, Kenya and Bangladesh – not to mention the many other visits that occurred between partners in Mwanza, and grassroots growth and maintenance over the last four years of the learning and sharing space that the partners created called Uvimwa. Part of the reason these were successful is because I was not driving or pushing or pulling anyone into these ideas. In this way we only went with things that actually had a community drive to them and a real desire coming from the partners. Our time together was spent walking towards a chosen place rather than my leading them to where I thought they wanted to go. And all the time the process had to be theirs.

To illustrate this I will leave you with one more word picture from a book I once read called the *Sea of Cortez* by John Steinbeck. In the story, the marine biologist Ed tells the reader that there are certain starfish in tidal pools that need special handling. They cannot, he says, be handled at all or they will break; instead it is better to lie something near them and let them crawl on top of it. I like that imagery and in some ways it is like good processes of community development. You can't pull or push people into doing something; they need to discover something for themselves, then test it, then own it and apply it. That will bring them an experience which they can use to make decisions for tomorrow.

So as much as it has been a good time for us in Mwanza we are ready for what is next. And we'll stay in touch with news as that all develops for us. Thank you.

peace and blessings, Steve