

BRIEF SUMMARY OF ST LEONARD'S, CHESHAM BOIS GLOBAL ALPHA TRAINING (GAT) VISIT TO MATANA, BURUNDI – FEBRUARY 2012

This is a brief summary of our recent weeklong GAT trip to Matana in Burundi. We had an excellent trip – it was wonderful for me to go back to Matana and to introduce five new people who had not been to Burundi before. The trip was completely safe and we had no security issues of any sort while we were there. It was definitely the rainy season and we experienced a number of torrential downpours, including one with heavy hail! We had virtually no outside communication for the week, despite taking mobile phones and a computer and all the mobile masts on Matana hill – we were dependent on the church's 3G card!



Jean-Claude and the local Alpha team were brilliant. Archbishop Bernard (recently elected as Chair of the Council of Anglican Provinces in Africa) gave a ringing endorsement of Alpha and told his clergy most emphatically that he wanted them to try it out and have the plans on his desk within a month!

To be honest our team were not really sure that Alpha would translate to such a different culture and we made lots of effort to make sure that we did all we could to help the transition, including paying for the printing of 'Questions of Life' in Kirundi for the delegates. It seems that small group discussion and praying for individuals is new to their church culture but they see Alpha as a tool which will be invaluable in the following ways, not only for spreading the gospel, but also as helping to rebuild their community after the war:

1. Alpha, by its inclusion of everybody, builds a new and unknown unity between denominations, especially Catholic, Pentecostal and Anglican, who would not normally be seen entering one another's churches. It is also helping build a new unity between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups and teaching people to include the marginalised Twa people (pygmy).
2. The teaching is providing good discipleship material. Archbishop Bernard asked the clergy what they used for sermon preparation. The answer was the only Christian books they have - the Bible, Prayer book and Hymn book. "Well now you also have the book 'Questions of Life' given to you by this team. It is full of good teaching and I want you to use it to help prepare your sermons from now on."
3. The small groups were a new feature of church life. The Christians are used to long sermons but culturally they are not invited to question or discuss anything so this was something they were very appreciative of and saw the spin-off of teaching people not only to question their faith but to participate in the new democratic society with all its political parties.
4. They are used to praying and singing in groups. Choirs are very common in worship but praying for individuals is not a practice they are familiar with. It was a revelation that women and lay-people could pray freely for their elders and clergy.



On a visit to a secondary school 'Group Biblique' (Christian Union) one of the team invited the 120 pupils to pair up and pray for one another. The school chaplain stood up and said to the pupils, "It is very important to learn this way of praying, to listen for God to speak as well as praying your own words. Yesterday the team invited us to receive this type of prayer. One of them laid a hand on my shoulder and prayed for me. I was very troubled and afraid because my wife was due to have a baby and we are having complications with the pregnancy. I

desperately wanted God to help and was longing for a girl. As he prayed for me, a special peace came upon me and I suddenly knew it would be alright. I went home and told my wife everything that had happened and that everything would be alright. I told her she would have the baby that night. She said that it was not possible as it was already 7pm and she felt no signs of anything but by 9pm the contractions started and the baby was delivered at 1am. We have called her 'Irishua' which means 'God answers'."

It had been 'a bit tricky' when the national Alpha leader came up to prepare the GAT two months beforehand. Now they were jostling to be the first to run the courses. Then the Archdeacons had complained that the 30 year old National Director was just a child coming to teach his elders. Fortunately the English team were all over 50!

Before we went we asked the local Alpha team leader what would be helpful for the on-going work of Alpha in the country. These actions came out of the response:

1. We felt that it was not very productive to teach Alpha if they were too poor to buy the text of the talks in 'Questions of Life' and even then only half of them could read it in French. The local team had translated it from French into Kirundi but had no funds to print it. We provided the £400 needed for every delegate to be given a copy in Kirundi.
2. For conferences they would hire a projector at great expense. One of our team members donated a new style LED projector which was small and less vulnerable than a bulb projector.
3. The Burundi national team had no guitars and would have to hire. We were able to donate two guitars.
4. We took books, baby clothes and blankets, knitted by members and friends of St Leonard's which were much appreciated. We also took some tools and wool and cotton and embroidery materials from WorkAid and gave them to a Mothers Union project for training young girls who could not afford to go to secondary school.

The Burundi team have a real heart for the gospel and using Alpha to extend the Kingdom. All the sessions of the GAT were recorded on video camera and will be used to train local teams and teams from churches in the neighbouring country of Congo.

As well as the three day GAT seminar, we had two days in Matana and were also able to enjoy:

- The Ou Be Ben hotel, one of three hotels now in Matana, complete with comfy beds and periodic hot running water.
- Bread and doughnuts baked in the bread oven built with the £600 raised from last year's Harvest collection.
- Conducted tours by Pelagie of the Mothers Union bread oven and girls sewing project.
- Preaching and attending services in three parish churches in Bururi, Mugamba and Matana cathedral.
- Leading the Christian Unions at the two secondary schools in Matana.
- Visiting the primary and secondary schools.
- Being taken to a big pineapple project in Musongati.
- Visiting a returning refugee/Batwa/community integration agriculture and microfinance project near Rutana.
- Visiting the southernmost source of the Nile.
- Visiting Archbishop Bernard's wife Mathilde's Rainbow fostering project in Bujumbura.
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Andrew Maclay and the GAT Team at St Leonard's Chesham Bois