

Perspectives



Out of Africa

IT IS A GLOBAL VILLAGE, AND IT IS NOT. TO BE SURE, GIVEN CNN, THE INTERNET, and multinational corporations, many things are pretty much the same everywhere. The ubiquity of Coca-Cola does bring the world into its own kind of “perfect harmony,” and I saw *Titanic* in Harare (Zimbabwe) the same day it opened in New York (though for considerably less money!).

But not everything is the same. There was a reason for the old initiation rites for sailors crossing the equator for the first time. Things are different in the south. The flora and fauna quickly (and happily) remind visitors from the northern hemisphere that they are no longer at home, and, though you don’t really stand on your head down there (as we may have thought as children), there is something oddly disorienting about enjoying the full summer sun while watching TV pictures of winter storms at home.

Differences of another kind became evident in putting together this “Africa” issue of *Word & World*. Our African colleagues wrote these articles under quite different conditions from the ones enjoyed by those of us doing the editing and production. We sit comfortably at our computers, with libraries at our fingertips and support staff at hand, and we can hardly think of working otherwise. Not so for many of our authors. They live closer to the edge.

Things came together for this issue only with difficulty. There were, of course, the tardy pieces and incomplete footnotes that plague an editor with every issue, but other things came up that were hardly the typical excuses. They came instead as stories, surprising enough to catch one up:

- One writer, with his manuscript in his briefcase, was the victim of armed robbery in Johannesburg, lost everything, and had to start again at the beginning.
- One church leader who had promised to write went incommunicado, having fled his own country because of threats on his life for daring to speak against governmental corruption.
- One teacher, while working on his article, was unable to continue because of the arrival of members of his family who were ill and who needed, expected, and got his total care, and because, beyond that, electrical power was not available for sufficient lengths of time to do any serious writing.

All of these accounts are true. None was offered as whiny excuse. They simply reflect the reality of the daily life in which these colleagues attempt to work. Add to this the invitations to write that never arrived at all because of the vagaries of communication and the articles that were slow in coming because work on them had to

be squeezed into a teaching and student load that none of us can even imagine, and there were days when I had my doubts about the viability of this issue.

But here it is. Authors came through—indeed, some days, articles seemed to arrive providentially—and we are given the rare opportunity of listening to and learning from a part of the church that we do not hear as often as we should. Whatever Henry Stanley (“Doctor Livingstone, I presume!”) meant in 1878 by describing Africa in his book title as the “dark continent,” that term no longer applies. Nor is Africa merely that exotic land where “apes swing to and fro” and children “have never heard the truth that comes from Jesus” as we used to sing in Percy Dearmer’s 1930 hymn. Africans have heard of Jesus—and they have responded by the millions. In many ways, the African church has become the hope of twenty-first-century Christianity. So we do well to invite its teachers and pastors to speak to us and to listen as they describe their work in a world that is ours and that is not ours. In some cases, the material is addressed directly to us; in others, we have the opportunity to overhear more uniquely African concerns and to think about what they mean for our own ministries and for our lives of prayer for “the whole people of God in Christ Jesus.”

The difficulties faced by the writers and potential writers of this issue reminded me to give thanks for the people and systems that support my own work and to continue to pray for the lives, courage, and safety of my African colleagues, as I know they pray for me. I am reminded to pray as well for other pastors and teachers who work in difficult conditions—not the least those in industrial inner-cities and, in a quite different way, those in rural isolation. I encourage you to join me. In this global village that is not one, we need one another. In this body of Christ, we are given one another. For that, we are grateful.

F.J.G.