

May 27th 2020

## News from Jonathan and Isobel Hill in Zimbabwe under COVID-19 lockdown.

As everywhere, things are not normal. We are in 'lockdown', which has been partially eased. So we have been trying to find new ways of doing whatever we did before. School term was originally planned to end on April 2nd and indeed the government was saying that it should be so until a sudden change of mind on Thursday evening March 19th when it was announced that schools would close on the following Tuesday, the 24th, (which meant for boarding schools like Thekwane High the children would actually start going home on Monday morning. No time then to give end of term tests or even to write reports on the basis of the term's exercises. There wasn't time to prepare work to give to the classes to keep them busy during the enforced absence, but knowing as we did that the return date was impossible to predict, I quickly set up some blank websites, one for each of my classes and gave the children the addresses. I have been putting some notes and exercises for the classes, but internet is not universally available and is often rather slow, but at least some of the children should benefit.

The nationwide lockdown was announced on March 27th and it began Monday morning, March 30th. Public gatherings had already been banned, so The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe at Connexional level hurriedly organised a live-streamed Sunday morning service for March 29th on Facebook. In Hillside Circuit, I asked the preacher who had been due to take the plan for our Hillside Methodist Church to send me her sermon notes so that I could post them on the circuit website. Since then I have been trying to redesign the website to make it more of a place to find worship resources. We have also been building up a network of communications so that information can quickly be spread around the members and friends of the circuit. "Steep learning curve" is the expression that could be applied here. We had not been used to posting online worship, so it was not quite working as well as we would have liked, but at least something went out on Palm Sunday and the website smashed all previous records of visitor numbers, especially to the "Sunday Worship" page.

Isabel is trying to monitor volunteers in the rural parts by phone, which is no substitute for visiting, but people are being strongly dissuaded from travelling. It was announced that security forces would "assist" people to observe the lockdown if necessary. Isabel usually helps destitutes from her office in the city centre of Bulawayo by giving them food from time to time, but that's also impossible, so in one or two cases she is sending money instead.

It's amazing how much needs to be done in the garden. We haven't yet run out of jobs that need to be done. I specialise in mowing, clipping, pruning and wheelbarrow pushing; Isabel mostly does planting, watering, weeding, raking. The lockdown rules don't allow for going out to exercise, unless you are walking to your nearest supermarket to buy essentials, but there is enough to be done in the garden that the Fitbit is kept happy.

I have been out a few times and supermarkets weren't replenishing their fresh produce very well, but that has now improved. Isabel, like so many people in Zimbabwe, keeps a very good vegetable garden, and we also have a banana plant which is just starting to give us a harvest. The bananas are very small, but also very nice.

We had been providing food for the children at Thekwane Primary School and there were still some non-perishable foodstuffs there when schools closed, but I don't know how exactly the volunteers will be able to use them now that children will not be allowed to gather at the school.

You may have seen on the BBC some weeks ago that they (the BBC reporters) were wondering if the Zambezi River, and hence the Victoria Falls, might be drying up. Well, I can assure you that very recently there have been about four and a half thousand cubic metres of water going over the Falls per second. That's enough to fill over a hundred Olympic-sized swimming pools every minute. This will flow into Lake Kariba and raise its level sufficiently that they will eventually be able to increase the amount of electricity generated. Meanwhile they have managed to find other sources of electricity, so power cuts are much less frequent. The rainfall here in the southern part of Zimbabwe has not been as good as that in the Zambezi catchment area, so Bulawayo still has to be very careful with consumption levels if we are to get through the rest of the year without the city's taps running completely dry.

Susannah's graduation ceremony was supposed to be held in July, but it has been postponed indefinitely. Tony is not going to work at the moment until some sort of normality returns, but Stephen has started back even though others at his workplace are still at home. I don't think schools will be opening here for some weeks yet. (The latest rumour says it will be June 15th for the external exam classes, with a gradual expansion to include other classes in stages over the following weeks.)

Winter is well on its way and temperatures are dropping. It's down into single figures Celsius at night and barely creeping into the twenties by day. Last night's TV weather forecast said, "moderate to severe frost in susceptible places", but we are not one of those places. Many of the trees are shedding leaves and the lawn is looking a bit sorry for itself. The well has dried up, so we are not getting enough water to keep the whole garden going. The whole of Zimbabwe is hoping for an early start to the next rainy season and for plenty of rain especially in Bulawayo and Matebeleland South, which has suffered badly these last couple of years with drought.

As with every situation, Zimbabweans are resourceful and always ready to see the positive side, but with the novel corona virus on top of everything else, it can be a challenge to stay cheerful. I'm saving a lot of money on petrol, that's for sure. People in Zimbabwe tend to be more imaginative with the choosing of names for their children and often the name will reflect something special about the time of birth. Now it is being suggested that there will be a baby boom soon, with children being named "Covid", "Lockdown", "Social Distancing" or even "Sanitiser"!

Isabel adds: With the lockdown it is very difficult to move, so we are in touch with caregivers by phone. Children are not getting any schoolwork because of not having phones or laptops. So they are just waiting like anyone else for things to normalise.

There are people whom we help with mealie-meal (the staple food) when the office is open; they phone for help, but it's so difficult for them to come to the city centre to collect because of the restrictions on movement. It's easier for those who live nearer to us, because we can phone them and arrange a place where they can meet us and collect.

Additional from June 9<sup>th</sup> 2020

All is well here except for the little frustrations of being locked down. Hope you are OK there.

We woke up this morning to find the electricity off and the water off. The inverter has failed so we haven't any backup electricity and the borehole has dried up so there is no backup water supply. One of those mornings when we feel like going back to sleep! Anyway, the electricity is now back and there is also a little trickle of water coming through the taps, so the panic is over for now.

Jonathan: There are a number of competing rumours about the dates for going back to school. Nothing official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (known affectionately as "Moppsy"), but they have said that provinces must ensure that teachers, administrators and other school staff must all be trained in how to operate under the new reality "by June 24th", so it suggests that we might return soon after that. The examinations board, ZIMSEC, says that the June exams will be postponed, to start on June 30th, but they have a habit of announcing things without proper consultation, so we can take that as 'thinking aloud'. Teacher unions and the Parliamentary Select Committee are all saying that not enough preparations have been made for schools to be reopened, so we will see.

Isabel: I have been receiving some donations, including one from the Women's Association in Marondera Circuit. I would normally have bought items and taken them to recipients, but instead, because of the lockdown, I have mostly been asking the Circuit Ministers to send a list of guardians of orphans with their phone numbers and then I have been sending money to each through Ecocash mobile money. Many people in both rural and urban areas on this side of the country are struggling and have not yet received anything through official channels.

Yesterday, the Women's Association at Hillside Methodist Church, of which I am a member, was leading our online worship and the following is an extract:

"In preparation for this service Women's Association members, not only from our own branches but those throughout the connexion, were asked what things or experiences had provided the most encouragement in the last two and a half months. Let me preface this with saying that some have experienced what is common to many: one member was in a community recording a Covid death, others where people had recorded being positive for Covid, some are on their own with no family around, some have been ill and needing hospitalisation, others have no income or very little, do not have any access to church "on line" or by whatsapp and therefore have not participated in communal worship of any kind since the lockdown. Whilst not denying there have been and still are some difficult, pressurised and discouraging times, all have expressed extreme thankfulness for the ways in which God is present.

- Thankful for "it was like He looked in my pantry and moved some wonderful person/friend to supply a wondrous bounteous supply of groceries"
- My family have been a great encouragement – in touch every day.
- The ways so many people have pulled together "to make a plan" and the ways that we have been able to worship God in smaller groups or on our own.
- More interaction between neighbours, even though it is from a distance, assistance with various jobs, a delivery (someone made a plan) of a beautiful bouquet on Mother's Day, many comforting and inspirational messages on various forms of media.
- 9/10 children leading morning prayers and youth and young people leading and presenting Sunday worship for the 13 of us in lock down. Sense of support from the bible study group constantly in contact.
- Daily messages morning and evening recorded by a leader of one of the main line churches in Bulawayo and those from other countries.
- Availability of messages from those in our circuit, district and connexional. For all those who are learning new technology to deliver it to us though those without internet access or data unable to

receive this support.

- Joy of being able to give to others sometimes sacrificially but also out of the bounty of God's provision and generosity to me – more than enough for my needs and to pass to others.
- Pastoral support from our leaders as they have felt able within their own constraints.
- Time to "stop" to spend more time with God in prayer. Reading the word and in reflection especially about what it means to be "church".
- Time to look back and meditate on what is important, what I don't want to go back to."

Tony, Stephen and Susannah are all well, but each one is in their own rented accommodation, so they are feeling the effects of loneliness. I think the latest relaxation of the lockdown rules means that they are now allowed to visit each other, but I don't think any of them has any outdoor area for meeting, so they will have to improvise something. Stephen is back at work making fruit-picking robots (and his diet these days seems to be mostly strawberries!) and Tony hopes to be back soon. Susannah has several applications in progress. My Mum is quite well and moving about more freely, but she is fed up of being at home all the time. She has entertained visitors in the garden on a couple of occasions, so that's helped to make her feel better.

All best wishes,

Jonathan and Isabel