

Youth president visit to Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

Attendees: Megan Thomas (youth president), Lynne Norman (Church and Community Development Officer), Syntiche Dedji

Duration of trip: Thursday 20 November- Wednesday 3 December 2014

Aims:

- To allow the Youth President (Megan Thomas) to experience Methodism in a different context.
- To build links with Children and youth in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, and to gain a better understanding of children and youth work in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe and the similarities/ differences with children and youth work in the Methodist Church in Britain.
- To gain an idea of what Methodism is like in Zimbabwe and how the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (specifically the youth department) functions.
- To visit one of the Methodist Church in Britain's partner organisations (Matthew Rusike Children's Home), and to gain an understanding of some of the ways in which they work.

Itinerary:

Fri 21 Nov 2014	Arrival
Sat 22 Nov 2014	Relaxed lunch executive- We will meet with the Connexional youth council executive over lunch to outline the programme
Sun 23 Nov	Service at Glenview
Afternoon	Vavambi Y.A (To meet the young adults there)
Mon 24 Nov	Travel to Byo via Great Zimbabwe (meet greater Bulawayo youth at Main Street, sleep at Lalani lodges)
Tues 25 Nov	Hwange tour (National park) and sleep at Hwange national Park
Wed 26 Nov	Tour vic falls and sleep at Victoria falls rest camp
Thurs 27 Nov	Travel to Gweru (and visit the youth centre) and sleep@ Ndhlela centre
Fri 28 Nov	Travel Pakame high school (and meet the students there) & Vungwi

Sat 29 Nov	Travel to Harare and visit Chihota, one of their rural circuits, sleep there
Sun 30 Nov	Service at Chihota and meet the youth
30 Nov	Travel to MRCH
Mon 1 Dec Borrowdale	Relax at Matthew Rusike, followed by farewell dinner with Harare youths at
Tues 2 Dec	Departure



We arrived in Harare on Friday 21 November exhausted, but excited, and were greeted at the airport by members of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Youth Department, by whom we were hosted. Although the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe gained autonomy in 1977, their youth department is slightly younger. They are due to celebrate their 25th anniversary in 2016.

We were met at the airport by Brenda, Youth President for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), Bruce, who was at the time Treasurer of the youth department of MCZ, but who was voted in as vice-president during the course of our stay; Rev Vuta from the Chihota circuit, and Mr Tinashe, the Connexional driver.

During the ride to Matthew Rusike Children's Home (MRCH), where we would be accommodated for the first three days of our stay, we were given a crash course in Shona, one of the main languages spoken in Harare. It was a journey filled with lots of laughter, and we all immediately got on. This is something that

was to continue throughout the course of our visit, and which would also characterise our time in Zimbabwe.



At the MRCH we were greeted by Margaret Mawire, the director of the home. In Zimbabwe the polite way to address elders is by calling them mama or baba, (mother or father). True to this title, Margaret Mawire was a quiet motherly presence- gentle but firm. We heard numerous times both before and during our trip that that the centre was in the best condition it had ever been. However, it had some needs, such as a need for running water and electricity. An electric generator funded by a grant from MCB helped them cope with the erratic supply of electricity. The generator was turned on for a couple of hours each morning to allow breakfast to be cooked and the children to prepare for school, and also each evening to allow dinner to be cooked and the children to prepare for bed.

Despite these challenges the Home seemed well organised and ran smoothly. The children were well disciplined and respectful, and carried out their chores with no complaint- just singing! It was obvious from the way the children and young adults addressed Margaret Mawire that they had a lot of respect for her.

Whilst touring the home one of the house mothers informed us that at MRCH they work very hard to make sure the young people are prepared for adult life and for living independently. Therefore boys and girls alike are taught to cook, clean and do the laundry in order to facilitate integration in the outside community when the time comes for them to leave.

Some of the projects carried out at the Matthew Rusike Children's home include breeding pigs and chickens, and growing various vegetables such as greens, butternut squash, tomatoes, corn etc and herbs.

During our time in Zimbabwe the MRCH was like a second home for us. Upon returning there after what seemed like a long time away visiting Bulawayo, Hwange and Victoria falls, we all said "we're home". This is a great testimony to the generosity and kindness of those who looked after us, and the extent to which we were made comfortable.

Saturday 22 November

We attended a youth outreach event at Celebration Church in Epworth and were informed that it is in Epworth that Methodism began with the arrival of South African missionaries. There were 450 young people at the event, of which 250 gave their lives to Christ! There was singing (including from some of the young adults from MRCH), drama and different workshops. Some of the young people who attended the event had HIV/AIDS so there were also workshops to equip them with the tools needed to live as a young person with HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe.

Throughout the course of the day we had interesting conversations with Brenda and Rev Noel Nhariswa (youth coordinator) who informed us that:

-The Youth coordinator is chosen by Methodist youth. The ministers have no say in who should be the youth Coordinator, nor can they refuse once they are chosen.

-Similarly to 3Generate, the youth conference decides on things to recommend to the main conference. This year they decided to recommend that the church recognises traditional marriages as well as the launch of a youth website. The latter recommendation was denied.

-The youth department has a youth farm, given to them by the main church, on which they grow green vegetables, tomatoes, cabbages, etc. They also have poultry (broiler chickens), and are planning to open a wedding garden as Zimbabweans are very enthusiastic about wedding venues. They think this would therefore be a good source of income. They also host people on the farm, and offer overnight hospitality.

Sunday 23 November

Glen View Methodist Church

On Sunday morning we went to Glen View Methodist Church where we had our first real experience of worship in a Zimbabwean Methodist church. We were introduced to the church leadership before the start of the service.

The congregation was predominantly female, the majority of whom were in uniform. The Women's Fellowship was attired in red and white, and the Girls Christian Union in white and red. The boys Christian Union had white blazers and ties with their logo.

The service was very lively, with a lot of very impressive singing and praise and worship. We were especially impressed with the older ladies who were leading the dancing and singing at the beginning of the service. The main instruments used during the service were maracas, but the singing was so melodic that we did not even notice the lack of a piano or organ until the end of the service!

During the course of the service we had the opportunity to introduce ourselves to the congregation, followed by a question and answer session at the end of the service with the church youth.

This was one of the highlights of the trip. We were all amazed to discover that young people in Britain had more in common with young people in Zimbabwe than we thought, especially in regards to the challenges faced by both groups. We were told unemployment is one of the biggest problems currently faced by young people in Zimbabwe today. Although they have a literacy rate of over 90%, of which they are very proud, and the vast majority of those we met in the church were graduates, studying at university or planning to attend university, at between 80-90%, the unemployment rate is nearly equally as high. Other challenges include peer pressure, drug abuse, reputation, and child trafficking.



Vavambi Young Adults

From Glen View Methodist Church we travelled to Mbare, where we visited the Vavambi Young adults.

This was a group of young adults comprised of people aged 23-35. The group was started because young people between these ages did not feel they had a place in the church, they went to church and then went home. They felt too old to be in the Boys or Girls Christian Unions, but felt too young to be in the Women's or Men's Fellowship, and did not feel that the Methodist Young Disciples group catered to their needs, as the majority of them are young professionals. The group was started to fill this missing age gap. The formation of the group has caused some controversy with a few saying that they will destroy the other groups.



Monday 24 November

We travelled from Harare to Bulawayo, the “city of Kings and Queens”. We met up with youth from Bulawayo East and West at Main Street Methodist church, interacted with the young people and were briefed in depth on the structures of their different youth groups:

Boys Christian Union:

- Around 150 members
- Work with boys aged between 3-35. This is split into two further groups (Juniors (3-13) and seniors (14-35))
- Deal with issues that affect boys in the church and the local community.

Challenges: - Outside peer pressure and how their organisation can help deal with this/ relate to it.

- Age difference- some are students, others adults, therefore when can they meet up?

Girls Christian Union:

- Around 205 members
- The young women learn cooking, how to take care of the house and of themselves
- They learn from mothers in the group and from Reverend mothers

Young Adults:

- For young people transitioning from/ who have transitioned from Sunday school to Adult church.

Challenges: - Commitment, Cliques, continuity and communication



Friday 28 November

Pakame High School

This was one of the highlights of the trip for us all. We travelled to Pakame where we visited Pakame High School. Upon arrival, the headmaster and other faculty members were very excited to meet us. Apparently the students were in need of encouragement, and they had been told we were all amazing inspirational speakers and motivators! This was a bit daunting, especially when we entered the hall and were faced with over 400 students eagerly waiting to hear what we had to say. They usually have about 687 students, of which about 6 were there thanks to a bursary/ scholarship.

Our presentation was delivered in the form of an interview. There were 7 questions which we answered in turn. The questions included, "How did you get to where you are now?" and "What are some of the challenges you have faced?" This was followed by a short question and answer session with the young people.

Afterwards we were given a tour of the school which included a bakery, where they make their own bread, the kitchen where they prepare unbelievable amounts of sadza, the poultry pens and the sewing rooms.



From Pakame we travelled to Shurugwi where we visited one of the MRCH satellite homes, a safe house situated in a very rural location, where vulnerable children thought to be at risk are taken.

Saturday 29-Sunday 30 November

The Youth Council

This was the official start of the Youth Council, which took place from Friday evening- Sunday morning at the Ndhlela Centre. The Ndhlela centre is a centre of hospitality which belongs to the youth department. They take room bookings, host conferences and also breed chickens. The centre should therefore be a source of income. However, during the youth council it emerged that the centre was facing financial problems, and was currently in a bit of a catch-22. The situation with the Ndhlela centre was something that upset us all as we felt they had a really great resource available to them, which utilised correctly, could be a great asset to the youth department.

During the Youth Council, amongst other things, all the Districts presented a report of the year and of the activities they carried out, the challenges they faced, and delivered a financial breakdown. The other districts then accepted/ discussed this report. I was impressed by this system of reporting as it promoted accountability, and made sure the districts were kept up to date with what was happening outside their district. It is also during the youth council that the calendar is drawn up for the year, with major youth activities that will take place in the various districts throughout the year. This is in order to avoid event clashes, hence allowing maximum attendance to events.

I was very impressed by the youth council. It was very transparent and accessible. We were able to fully understand and participate in nearly all aspects of the youth council, to ask questions regarding their finances and to receive honest answers. This is something I felt would be very hard to come by in the UK, where a lot of similar meetings can be quite opaque and it can be very hard for strangers to fully understand the proceedings.

Chihota and Muda Village

Saturday afternoon we travelled to Chihota, a rural village not far from Harare, and stayed in Muda village. This was something we were all very nervous about, as we did not know what to expect.

On arrival however, we were warmly greeted with singing and dancing, and soon settled in. We had a great evening speaking and laughing with our host family, and learning about traditions in rural households, learning how to cook sadza, and singing and dancing around the hut with drums and maracas. After dinner we all sat around the fire and listened to Gogo (grandma) as she told us Zimbabwean folk tales, and then settled down to sleep on the floor of the hut.

I don't think I will ever forget my stay at Chihota and how this family so generously opened their home to us. I felt it truly was a once in a lifetime opportunity which I was blessed to have experienced.

The following morning we were woken up at 5am (having been allowed to sleep in as we were guests), to go ploughing. We then pumped water from a well and went on a tour of the village which included their primary school, a secondary school in the process of being built, a church and a medical centre.



Before going to church we stopped to visit a tobacco farm which, at 80 acres, was the largest in the area. The majority of the produce grown on the farm is exported to China and the UK as not many people in Zimbabwe consume tobacco.

The Church service was once again very lively, filled with lots of singing and dancing, and we heard a horn being played for the first time, a great addition to the praise!



Monday 1 December

A goodbye barbeque was organised for us at Borrowdale Methodist Church, which is currently under construction. On our way there we passed Celebration church, the largest church in Zimbabwe, which looked just like a hotel. Borrowdale Methodist Church is expected to be bigger than celebration church once it is completed.



On Monday we also visited the Connexional office, and had hot chocolates with Rev Amos Ndhumbi, the presiding Bishop of MCZ



Final reflections

Our time spent in Zimbabwe was full on, and filled with lots of travelling- travelling on bumpy roads, smooth roads, and no roads. We spent time with the Girls Christian Union, the Boys Christian Union, the Young Disciples, and the Young Adults. We saw breathtaking mountain views, sunsets, heard amazing singing, and danced. A lot. It was a time of new experiences, of excitement, admiration, of thankfulness, of humility and of worship. But one thing that was consistent throughout all of this was laughter and fellowship. And it is these two words that characterise for me, our visit to the Methodist Church in

Zimbabwe. The welcoming and generous spirit of those we met is something that really touched me, challenging me to re-think how I welcome and relate to people here in the UK.

I was also marked by the confidence and freeness of young people in Zimbabwe, who were not at all afraid to stand up and preach, or sing or dance. Their example taught me a lot about boldness, and gave new meaning to the term “being free in the Lord”.

We were genuinely sad to leave Zimbabwe and those with whom we had spent the past 14 days. As Lynne so correctly said, we felt as if we had not only made friends, but best friends.

