

My Christmas letter

Dear friends and family,

Another year is ending already and I wish to write with news of the year in my life to update you with a few details of part 2 of my life in 2010 and the development of the new work I now find myself involved in Ozuzu-Oke.

I have enjoyed an entire year of excellent health, with no attack of malaria despite my evening exposure to mosquitoes during the precious hour of sunset. Physically, I continue to regain strength, my left leg and arm remain paralyzed, with little extra return of mobility on the arm but on going new targets set and achieved on the leg, sensation has not returned on the entire left side of my body and my dyspraxia and spatial problems remain the same but manageable with continuous work on strategies I was experiencing some eczema on my leg which was initially caused by the strap on my leg splint, which I wear on my left leg to help me walk.

In May, I was due for home leave and travelled to UK. For 3 months, the joy of this was that my court case against the hospital judged in my favor and the settlement has enabled me to have a house in South London near the family, which my nephew had done a superb job of doing up for my return making it all accessible with a stair lift and a lovely garden such a relief to be able to stay in UK without being a burden on family members.

It's really a lovely house and Kate had worked so hard on interior decorations for me and I felt very comfortable and at home there for 3months.

Seeing friends, doing medicals, and attending the furlough conference for Methodist Mission partners on leave and doing an 8-day silent retreat at St. Beunos in North Wales is always a most inspiring and enriching experience.

I had a lovely week in Littlehampton where my Sister has a flat and returned to Nigeria on July 31st for the Nigeria Methodist Conference this year holding in Umuahia, so I could attend from my house each day.

The house here in Nigeria feels very much home now, the absence of a garden compensated for by a yard, simply bursting with shrubs and flowers making it a lovely place to sit out and paved so I can do my daily walk there each evening.

While in UK, my neighbor had twin girls and their cries are a permanent feature in life these days as she trades daily in the market leaving her 11year old son taking care of the twins each day.

Being resident in an African village exposes me to the early morning town crier banging his special stick on a piece of wood and announcing the day by day gatherings of the men, the women and the youth, the Igbos being a highly organized people. As a woman, I pay my monthly dues and my levies in cash and kind during marriages and burials.

August marked the annual new yam festival. Which meant nightly sleeping to the wonderful sound of the African drums and often, entertaining groups of young men and girls singing and dancing from house to house in the early evening. Whenever a young man or girl in the village is marrying, they will bring me an invitation with perhaps some soap, kitchen utensils depending on their economic status. I enjoy the traditional marriage ceremonies a lot more than the subsequent church blessings often an attempt to do it like the western world bridesmaids and page boys down to the white gloves and cake.

You may recall I inherited the first week of moving into the house, a widow and 5 kids her husband had been employed as my security worker by the church committee who had the house built for me but he died the first week I moved in from HIV/AIDS. The widow works for me as a cleaner in the house and the kids are here much of the time though all are now in school.

5 very malnourished kids they were and we have had scares with 2 of them; the youngest severely anemic we had to get pints of blood for transfusion to pull her through. And this last month, the eldest had

meningitis but better nutrition is having a long term effect and I am happy they are all serious about school. Off at 7am each day and at 7pm as I sit to watch the news on BBC world which someone put in my TV for me, the kids religiously use the hour to do their home work. My carers too have done well advising the mother on nutrition and child care, though she is still very careless about her kids' health. Despite the fact I pick up all the bills, she is still very young and with 5 kids and no husband, life is not easy for her.

The last child does not like wearing clothes of any description which causes big problems each day as she gets flogged if she takes her clothes off in school by the teachers. The other day I was about going to work and found her crawling under the car and couldn't understand why until my carer discovered she had removed her pants and threw them under the car so no one would find them. As always, I love having the kids around, they keep me happy.

I have been so blessed with carers here. All this year, 2 girls both from the village where the Ozuzu-oke retreat centre is sited, both hard working committed trust worthy girls, and very good friends which helps, so have a peaceful household.

We have a lot of fun, we laugh a lot. My 2 former carers both kids from the colony are both now in higher institution. Studying and often around at weekends and holidays, which is also nice.

I had a change in my driver and secretary, this year. The driver I discovered to be cheating me in the buying of fuel and maintenance of the vehicle so he was dismissed. Luckily, the project management committee had employed a driver so I hijacked him and he is now working for me. The secretary lost her mother and her brother who lives in Abuja fell apart, so she took a job in Abuja to be close to him. I then employed the brother of one of our ministers in our theological college here - a graduate, as my secretary, Promise by name. He is with me and I am enjoying him immensely.

Before I talk about the work, I want to mention something I found myself deeply embroiled in now. AWWDI (advocacy for women with Disabilities initiative) has been started by the big German NGO CBM Christoffel blinden mission who have setup chapters in all the states of the Nigerian federation and asked me to setup a branch here in Abia State. I accepted to chair it until February 2011 and it has been the biggest challenge I have ever faced, 100 mentally ill people are easier than 100 disabled women.

Yesterday was our end of year meeting, the governor's wife had given us 5 bags of rice and 1 bag of beans for Christmas and disabled women came out of every nook and cranny for their share.

The deaf, spinal cord injured and many blind and loads of wheel chairs. I have a 10-person executive team who meet monthly in my house but at a point, I thought we should have to bring in police. They fight, yell attack each other with their crutches but by 7pm without the police we had given each person 10 cups of rice and one bowl of beans for Christmas.

It's the saddest effect of poverty one sees here bringing out such aggression and selfishness we have this year managed to pay school fees to two disabled women studying and provide wheel chairs to 4 women who crawled around on the floor and one big 16yr old still carried by her father to school daily on his back.

This year AWWDI hosted the celebration of World Disabled Day. The women exhibited crafts, cakes and dishes they make. We printed cards and made some noise to let people know what we were about, it was a successful day if only to assist the women begin to feel better about themselves, their self esteem is so low and to find partners in marriage a real issue for them. But they need one of their own to lead them and I am working hard to build someone up and stand down in February.

Since my stroke, my command of the Igbo language is less than it was and controlling 100 screaming disabled women all shouting for their rights and their wants is more than I can do. My inability since the stroke to recognize

people is perhaps what bothers me more than anything else. I have to check a person's clothes, colour ear-rings etc to recognize who I am talking to.

I'm always upsetting folk for not recognizing them and this is a society so hung up on personal identity. I was particularly disturbed at yesterday's meeting at the condition of 5/6 children of the disabled women all grossly under nourished not well and fractious and realized we should try to do something to provide help to these women who have children, all single women a new challenge for 2011

And so to the work Ozuzu-Oke initially called the centre for spiritual direction now simply Ozuzu-Oke retreat centre. 2010 saw us held back by the project coordinator; a senior Methodist minister posted to us by the Methodist conference. An excellent spiritual director but a man who lives a careless disordered life totally incapable of coordinating the establishment of a retreat centre this year's conference has transferred him out and replaced him with a young bright minister identified by our own management committee as someone who could be useful to us.

He is now fully posted as the Ozuzu-Oke coordinator and has just completed his 30 days spiritual Exercises the basic training for our work. He lives in Umuahia close to me so is accessible. My other directors working with me are both very committed to the work, though one developed diabetes this year and is not yet stabilized with that. It is a difficult time to secure funds for new work worldwide but we have been grant aided now by an American foundation and the construction of the first building at the permanent site is about to start together with the centre foundation laying ceremony to be performed by the prelate of Methodist church Nigeria on 17th January 2011.

We trained a team of unemployed youth in molding bricks using 4 machines donated to us and 15,000 bricks and 20,000 blocks are already on site for the construction of the first building. Two persons have applied

to be trained as spiritual directors in 2011 which will bring our team of directors to 6 plus 1 associate director and mean we can begin to carry out non-residential retreats for up to 40 people at a time.

Ongoing training and supervision is written into the centre's core activities. I myself have just found a new director, a wise catholic priest leading a seminary of 600 with years of experience in spiritual direction and formation. I personally continue to direct some 20 people monthly including those on the centre's days of renewal and weeks of guided prayer.

I am delighted to have found a spirituality which helps people face their struggles in daily life and my God, they face some struggles in life here with the insecurity of life and property, the appalling health services and poverty, rather than a spirituality used as an aspirin used to relieve the pain of life. This spirituality enables people to look at their own ability to understand themselves so as to be able to give quality leadership in this country. It encourages people to act peacefully and non-violently to crisis in their lives to forge weapons of war into tools for agriculture that we may feed the hungry instead of killing them. All easy to say, but more difficult to do requiring humility, forgiveness and an ability to place others above ourselves - the essential mandate of the gospel.

It remains for me a work that is an enormous privilege seeing the workings of God in the lives of those who come for guidance as they face the heart breaking struggles and issues faced each day by the people of this nation, Nigeria.

Nonye

Nonye has been in Ghana having decided after the kidnapping experience that he is more comfortable in Africa than in UK so joined a school mate from secondary school in Ghana and got admission in ACCRA Polytechnic to study architectural design.

He has had a good year there but was involved in a nasty motor bike accident in August in which his friend with him on the bike died he sustained a head injury which has healed after stitches the experience made him stop a little and look at his life, so he decided to come back to Nigeria to do his IT - a work placement part of the course and returned 3weeks ago to do it with an architect here in Umuahia.

It has been good for us to touch down again though it will never be easy for us both under one roof, he has certainly moved on in his life and is much more serious about what he is doing and where he is going, he talks of settling finally in Ghana and in future putting up a house for himself there and in the mean time, he knows he is always welcome here and feels very comfortable with my household and all its inhabitants here. He has 2 more years to go before graduating followed by a year's national youth service which he wants to do in Ghana. I like to be called mum rather than auntie.

Merry Christmas and Happy New.

Ros Colwill