



MISSION ZIMBABWE: BRIDGES OF CARE

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**MISSION ZIMBABWE 3:**  
**KAMATIVI AND BINGA MISSION STATIONS**  
**“FLOWERS IN THE DESERT”**



All Saints, Kamativi Altar

**Desert Song**

This is my prayer in the desert  
When all that's within me feels dry  
This is my prayer in my hunger and need  
My God is the God who provides.

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## DAY 1

We left St Francis on Thursday 29 October at 13h15, all vehicles and the Mission team having been blessed and anointed by Fr Timothy and Fr Grant Thistlewhite. The Mission team was made up of Erik and Gesine Buiten, Ann Thistlewhite, Linda Lewis, Brian Tomlin, Rudi and Lize von Staden and myself, Nina Lowes.

Despite careful preparation for the trip we once again encountered obstacles such as lost car papers that had to be replaced in 24 hours but in all these instances God helped us reach the point of departure with all we needed.

We left in good spirits and high anticipation of what God would do on this trip. We were heading for the Church of the Ascension in Bulawayo and from there we were planning to visit two mission stations – All Saints, Kamativi and St John's Binga, where we would fellowship with the people and deliver the food and other goods we were carrying with us.

## DAY 2

After an overnight stop in Louis Trichardt, we headed for Beit Bridge on Friday 30 October at about 07h00, reaching the border post at approximately 08h30. We quickly cleared the South African side, reaching the Zim side in an hour. We had arranged for Fr Shingi to meet us on the Zim side to assist with the clearance of the goods but unfortunately he had been delayed. He had made contact with a clearing agent on our behalf who then assisted us with customs procedures. The border post was orderly and we managed to clear our goods and get through in 2 hours. Much prayer had proceeded this with many requests that God clear the path ahead of us and truly the path through the border was cleared. We were wearing our Mission Zimbabwe t-shirts and at the border and throughout our trip, we were questioned by Zimbabweans wanting to know what the Mission was all about. Time and time again we were asked if we had bibles, which sadly we had not been able to obtain before we left but vowed to take a whole trailer full with us on the next trip. Never once did people ask us for money or food, but always they asked us for bibles.

We left Beit Bridge at about 11h30 heading for Bulawayo. We were astonished to see a new road sign next to the road! The first we had ever seen on our trips. Unfortunately, the road sign now indicated that the road we were on was a toll road and the cost was US\$1 per vehicle. This was the road that according to locals has taken 10 years to build but we could see that compared to our last trip, progress had now definitely been made. Apparently the Chinese are assisting with the funding for the road.

But life with Mission Zimbabwe never seems to go smoothly! Approximately 100km from Bulawayo Erik started experiencing problems with his vehicle's brakes. Gesine, Ann, Linda and I were ahead of the other two vehicles and it took us about 40km to realize that they were no longer behind us. We sms'd back to find out if there was a problem only to be told "Problem with Erik's brakes. Get .3 brake fluid". So here we are, four women in the car and we can't figure out a) whether the dot in front of the three is meant to be there?? I mean, what the heck is .3 brake fluid?? and b) we are in the middle of nowhere, knowing full well that shops in Zim are devoid of these kind of things and c) the road is empty of all habitation, shops or towns in both directions as far as we can see. Ok, nothing for it, we

decide to go on in the hope of finding a petrol station (ha ha) or worst case scenario, reaching Bulawayo, getting help and heading back to fetch the others.

We travelled for about 10km and then saw a petrol station next to the road. We stopped in high hopes only to be told they had no brake fluid. We were told to carry on another 20km to the town of Mlababla (which at the time sounded to us like “carry on 20 km and ask for Mohammed”!). We duly continued and in due course came to the town which was really more of a rural village. We drove in and found the petrol station, (still looking for a sign that said Mohammed!) around which about 10 men were sitting. Well, I decided that being timid would not help us, so I climbed out of the car and asked the man who came forward if he had any brake fluid. He said yes and indicated I should follow him into the back room of the station, which I did. The back room contained crates of coca cola and in front of me on the wall were four wooden shelves all empty except for....2 bottles of .3 brake fluid! I couldn't believe my eyes! I paid the asking price of R100 for the two as I was too grateful to argue but told the man that God had led us to him, which left him feeling rather confused about the whole transaction. I carried the brake fluid out and we triumphantly returned to take our treasure to the



stranded ones, claiming that we were intrepid adventurers but that above all God had indeed given us a miracle.

We then watched in awe and wonder as Rudi and Lize climbed under the car to do repairs to the leaking brake tube, using Pratley's putty, chewing gum and a clamp. Lize, you are the Pratley putty queen without a doubt! The leaking brake fluid hampered operations and as it was now dark, we finally decided that some of us should proceed to Bulawayo to get help.

We had already contacted Fr Shingi to tell him the situation but as he had not replied, we were not sure whether he received our message. Ann, Linda, Brian and I set off to Bulawayo, unaware that we had passed Fr Shingi on his way to rescue us. We later received an sms to say that Fr Shingi had arrived and that the other two vehicles were now limping their way to Bulawayo, so we were to carry on.

But the miracles had not ended. When we arrived in Bulawayo and expertly by luck found our way in the dark to the Church of the Ascension, Linda and I discovered that our host was a mechanic with a workshop all kitted out for fixing Erik's brake problems. Thank you to Hal McCay for his repairs to the vehicle, which enabled us to carry on to Binga the next day.

### DAY 3

On Saturday we unpacked all the trailers at Ascension and Fr Shingi then allocated the goods that were to be transported to Kamativi and Binga.

We left the Church at about 13h00 on the road to the first mission station, All Saints Kamativi. We were accompanied by Fr Shingi and 6 members of his congregation, some of whom had never been to Kamativi or Binga before. The road to Kamativi and Binga is lined with beautiful trees and further back from the roads were the teak forests, now much denuded. We were blessed with cool, rainy weather for which we were extremely grateful.



We stopped to rest at place called Halfway House and there discovered that Joe Mhlabi's vehicle was leaking petrol. (Joe is the Treasurer of the Church of the Ascension and after our last trip to Bulawayo he took charge of the outreach programme to the mission stations.) Once again Rudi came to the rescue and together with Gideon of the Church of the Ascension, repaired the leak. Rudi said he enjoyed excellent fellowship with Gideon whilst being doused with petrol under the car! It is amazing how God always foresees our needs and provides the right people for the team.

During our stop at Halfway House, I noticed a dog-collared priest arrive accompanied by a nun and another priest. I immediately went over to find out who they were and explain who we were, only to discover I was speaking to the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Hwange. He told us that he and his fellow priest had been in Zimbabwe since the 1970's and were originally from Spain. Fr Shingi knew many of the Catholic priests from that area and had a wonderful time catching up on news of old friends.



Fr Shingi and the Bishop of the Diocese of Hwange

Whilst driving along the road, we saw sawn logs of teak being loaded onto a brand new truck. When we asked about this, we were told that the farms along this road had all been taken over by members of the government and were being steadily being stripped of anything of worth.

As we drive I just see again and again how beautiful Africa is. As the sun starts to set, I see the outline of the tree branches against the reddening sky and it looks like a multitude praising God

and there is nowhere else I would rather be than right there , at that moment.

We drive down a steep road into a valley, the sky a darkening blue against the surrounding hills. We cross the river in the valley floor. Words that describe the essence of this place are: lonely, deserted, barren, natural and unspoilt and very far from the madding crowd.

We arrived in Kamativi at about 18h00 and as it was already dark, we were not able to get much impression of the immediate countryside surrounding All Saints Church but were greeted by the strains of a gospel song – “When I am here, worthy Lord, I will give you the glory” and “Lord, I can feel your presence in this place”. The parishioners gave us a warm and wonderful welcome and they were indeed just warming up for the celebration of their patronal festival on the Sunday. We were invited to enter the church and Ann and I preceded the others. On entering both she and I were amazed by the beautiful way in which the parishioners had decorated their church and as we looked at the altar, the candles, the wall hangings and the beautiful mural behind the altar, painted by a local artist now living in Johannesburg, we noticed the flowers draped over the front and sides of the altar. Ann murmured next to me, “Look at that – flowers in the desert”. We both sat and wept at the front, overcome by these people, who with so few resources had so lovingly decorated their church in honour of God.



Food at the altar of All Saints

We spent some time at Kamativi and were treated as honoured guests. Fr Shingi spoke to the people saying that our coming to them was a sign of God’s love and care and that we as God’s people are one. The children sang “Jesus loves me” and we had an entrancing 10 minutes of listening to a little 6 year old girl recite various Bible passages by heart, two of which were:



John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

And John1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”.

It was a wonderful testimony to the dedication of the Sunday School teachers and this child knew these verses of pat! The people were especially happy to receive the school materials for the children and this together with the request for Bibles was an ongoing need with the people we met.



Little girl reciting Bible verses

ourselves.

#### DAY 4:

We left the camp the next morning and headed out to the mission station at Binga. This drive took ages as we soon turned off the tar road onto a dust road and a distance of 29km took us about two hours due to road conditions.

We at last reached the tiny, mud church of St John's and I was struck by how appropriate a name it was – this small community of Christians literally out in the wilderness of Binga.

The countryside in the Binga area is desolate, dry, studded with stunted trees and regularly intersected by dry river beds. The temperatures can soar to 45°C in summer and we were extremely grateful for the overcast, cooler temperatures of approximately 36°C we experienced.

Once again we were warmly welcomed and very proudly shown into their new church. According to Fr Shingi, the community at Binga had been given hope by his previous visit to them in June, not only through the goods delivered to them but mainly because of the realization that there are people out there who care. This sense of hope had stimulated them had rebuilt their church using hand-made mud bricks, thatched a new roof, split logs for new “pews” and adorned the church on the outside with three simple wooden crosses.

We left All Saints and proceeded to our overnight stop at Mlabazi at the edge of Kariba Lake. The drive through the dark was as usual made more difficult by the presence of potholes and animals on the road. As it was already dark we also did not get to see the lake until the next morning but we spent a wonderful evening conversing with our hosts from Bulawayo, sharing and discussing the ways in which life differs in Zimbabwe and how God works in all of our lives regardless of the circumstances in which we find



The altar and pulpit of the church remained those that were in the old church and I was touched to see that their altar cloth was an old baby's blanket with pink elephants on it.

Fr Shingi preached to the people on Matthew 5 v 13 – “Jesus said “You are the salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is good for nothing but to be thrown away and trodden underfoot”. He said to them that as we, the Mission team, had travelled so far to come and bring God's love to them, so they in turn must be as salt in their world and take God's love out to those in their greater community.

As always it was humbling and moving to spend time with people who serve God under such dire circumstances. This small community so poor in material goods, have erected a church in order to have somewhere to come and praise God .

Using an interpreter, Erik spoke to the people about the importance of passing on and sharing what they have with the wider community and that as we come to help them at St John's, so they in turn must go out and help others.

After the food and clothing was unloaded, the Mission team together with the Ascension team met with the leader of the St John's community, a teacher named Dickson. Together we discussed ongoing projects that we could help establish so that the community can start to provide not only for themselves but for others around them in the Binga area. One of the projects is the purchase of the land on which the church is built and another project is the possible digging of a well to provide water for a vegetable garden. During these discussions, we set up contacts who would carry out the necessary fact finding and report back to us so that we can find a way forward. Some of the team members felt that St John's Binga should become a permanent outreach project for Mission Zimbabwe and this is to be prayed about and explored further.

The people of St John's are a very small community, mainly women and children with a few men. Some of the children look undernourished and apathetic and river blindness is common in this area although we only saw one blind person at St John's that day. Some of the people were wearing the clothing we had sent up on our last trip.



**THE CHILDREN OF BINGA**



**We left Binga vowing to return to continue to water the seeds planted by God before and on the day of our visit.**



**We came away from Kamativi and Binga amazed by the power of God and the faith of people, who whilst living in poverty can create small, God-serving communities, which like flowers in the wilderness, testify to God's love for humanity. As testified by the little girl at Kamativi when she recited John 8:12 – "Again Jesus spoke to them "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life". The people of All Saints Kamativi and St John's Binga have the light of life.**

**We parted from Fr Shingi and his team as we left St John's, as they were returning to Bulawayo the same afternoon. Before leaving Pretoria, the Mission team had decided that a rest night would be a good thing before undertaking the long drive back to Bulawayo and from there to Pretoria. Previous trips had taught us that the distances we travelled and the emotional and spiritual impact of visiting the mission stations left us feeling exhausted and we were loathe to undertake the 1000 km return journey without a good overnight break to refresh ourselves, fellowship as a team and talk about our experiences.**

**From St John's we therefore drove to the actual town of Binga, up near Kariba Lake, where we spent a wonderful evening in a lodge overlooking Kariba. It was a fantastic experience, as the area is devoid of tourists and crowds and we felt so privileged to be able to enjoy something that in its heyday must have cost the earth but which in the current economic and political climate in Zimbabwe cost practically nothing.**



## View of Kariba Lake from the lodge

### DAY 5

One of the “only in Zimbabwe” stories that happened to us is that when we left the lodge the next morning, we had to go in search of petrol for Rudi’s car and diesel for Erik’s. We found the diesel close to the lodge but when making enquiries at various petrol stations for petrol, were told that there was none, as the petrol delivery had been diverted for President Mugabe’s trip to Victoria Falls!

After leaving the lodge we drove the approximately 350km back to Bulawayo. However, our adventures were not yet over and on the way up a steep hill, Rudi’s vehicle developed a heavy knocking sound. We pulled into a lay-by and on opening the bonnet, Lize diagnosed the problem as “Check the oil Rudi”, which turned out to be spot on! Our other vehicle had been ahead of us and we waited patiently next to the road in the boiling heat for them to realize that we were no longer behind them. There is no cell phone reception in this part of the country and we decided that part of our emergency kit for the next trip should be two-way radios! We made good use of our time by drawing up a list called the “emergency car kit” and believe me it now includes everything except the kitchen sink and even that would come in handy! Eventually our team mates returned, received instructions to buy oil and return, which they then proceeded to do, also bringing a jerry can of much needed petrol to see us through to the next petrol station at Cross Roads.

We made it safely back to Bulawayo by late afternoon and enjoyed a convivial evening with our hosts. Hal told us his story of life in Zimbabwe:

Hal used to receive a pension of Z\$3,500 per month and during last year the company paying him his pension, wrote to him and other pensioners informing them that the cost of writing, banking and clearing the pension cheques was greater than the pension they were being paid. The company had therefore decided to pay all pensioners out a lump sum settlement, which Hal duly received in his bank account. Because of the devaluation of the Zim dollar at the time, Hal said he became a quanticu-millionaire (PLEASE all accountants, don’t ask me to explain this!) overnight but that two weeks later, when the zeros were slashed off the Zim dollar, he lost his entire pension and became a pauper overnight. Hal spoke without bitterness about this although his distress about his situation was evident. His faith in God’s provision remains firm and once again I felt humbled by someone who whilst possessing nothing can state his utter belief in God’s love for him. Hal said that all the money

he possesses is that which can be found in his back pocket, which he earns from odd jobs fixing vehicles or manufacturing iron work such as gates. Hal's story was a reminder to me of the impact of the Mugabe regime on all the people of Zimbabwe and I admired his courage in staying and coping with his situation.

#### DAY 6

We departed Bulawayo at about 08h30 the next morning and for once enjoyed a trip unbroken by car troubles. We cleared the border in about 1 hour and experienced our usual feelings of sadness mixed with gladness mixed with exhaustion mixed with...emotions of all kinds as we reached South African soil.



As glad as we always are to return home, we continue to feel the pull of Zimbabwe in our spirits and no matter how overwhelming the need of the people there is compared to the little we are able to contribute to this enormous problem, no matter how exhausting it is doing fund raising and making all the necessary arrangements for the trip, both on the SA and Zim side, no matter how we come away feeling we have given less than we have received, we know that God has called this small but growing team of disparate people together for reasons which only He alone is clear about. But we trust in Him and so, onward to Binga / Harare 2010! Watch this space.....





**OUR GRATEFUL THANKS GO TO:**

All those who made donations of all kinds towards the Mission - your generosity is so appreciated.

Fr Shingi, Joe Mhlabi and Denise in the office of the Church of the Ascension for helping with the endless arrangements and rearrangements.

Our gracious hosts – Mabel, Hal and Wendy. Thank you for making us feel so welcome.

The St Francis Mission Fund for the hefty contribution towards our petrol costs.

All the people who prayed for our safety and the success of the Mission.

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