

A testimony from our time in Africa

There was unrest in the Casamance area of southern Senegal for a number of years. We were serving there at Bourofaye Christian School (BCS), which was set up by WEC for the children of missionaries. At BCS we lived against the backdrop of this ethnic and political conflict, which erupted sporadically from time to time.

There came a day....30th August 1997. Anyone from the UK who is over the age of 30 may have at least some recollection of this date. This was the day when Princess Diana died in a car accident, and subsequently across the UK there was a great outpouring of national grief. But we were not there...we were out in the bush, with no Internet. It was only some time afterwards that we realised it had happened at all.

We were in a different world. It was the school holidays and only the expatriate school staff were living on our beautiful site with its mango trees, palm trees and beautiful birds.

Here is an extract from Gill's diary. [All extracts are in italics.]

Saturday 30th August 1997

Things have moved very fast. On Wednesday evening we received the news that the army had moved into the local village. Friday morning was noisy and quite scary ...shelling and machine gun fire, alarmingly close. I was in our team mates' house holding the baby (5 months old) while her mum was trying to pack her things. The African staff members were in there having their coffee, and they were scared stiff. Five new staff members are in the Gambia and three more will arrive soon.

Most of us left on Thursday and Friday, going into town where it was safer. We took very few possessions with us today as we drove away.

My overwhelming feeling is one of sadness and a heavy heart. This morning Steve had to evacuate Thérèse (one of our African staff) into the local town, as her house in the village is next to where the army have set up. Thérèse took almost everything into Ziguinchor. She even brought her chickens, and one escaped at the police checkpoint. The gendarmes gave up looking at the baggage as they were trying to catch the chicken...such is life in Senegal.

Tuesday 2nd September

This morning our security committee met. We are praising the Lord that it seems that we'll be able to rent an empty Bible College in a suburb of Dakar called Keur Massar. The college belongs to the Assemblies of God but is not in use right now. This means that we can keep the school together, but it also means that day pupils will have to become boarders, or be home educated. We are hoping that this will only be till Christmas. God is good. He is still carrying us.

A few days later a group of us made the 11 hour journey to Dakar in a minibus. There were all three of our children, myself and some of the new teachers. Steve was not with us as he had stayed behind to take all the electrical stuff – computers etc. – in the school vehicle to the port, and then travel up with it on the overnight ferry. On the roof of the minibus we had several very heavy suitcases full of school books. It was quite frightening because from inside we could see the roof struts cracking, but they held – probably due to

prayer. We were stopped by the police several times who told us that we were overloaded. They were right.

When I first saw where we were to live I could not believe it. I said very little, just keeping the feelings inside. Later we christened the accommodation the 'cell blocks' which aptly described them. Steve and I, David and Peter had two small rooms side by side. They were in a whitewashed African block with a basic bathroom between our side and two more rooms which were taken by another family. The rooms were very dirty and bare. There were concrete floors— fine, we were used to that – and the windows were glass but there was no mosquito netting. There was one light switch and we attached light bulbs to the empty, dangling fittings. There were no ceilings and this made the rooms unbelievably hot. The toilet was African style – we were OK with that but it was a challenge to keep clean. There was a basic shower, a public washbasin and a concrete sink for washing clothes. We shared the sink and basin with the family next door. Our bed consisted of a mattress placed on a wooden pallet held up by breeze blocks. (Actually this was quite comfortable, though not very pretty!)

I realised that for many urban African people, this sort of accommodation was standard. It was not that we were unwilling to live at a simple level. The problem was that we were suffering from the shock of being forced to leave our home, and total exhaustion from all that we had had to cope with so far. There was no time to rest, reflect or be counselled – we had children to care for, new staff to look after and a school to run. Soon we would need to be reassuring anxious parents, among them two families whose daughters were halfway through their GCSE's.

The school term was delayed by only two weeks, which was a miracle given the work that needed to be done to make the place habitable.

Michael lived with the other boys of his age who were boarding, and he loved it. However, our family had some health problems during the first term...David had an abscess under his arm and both Steve and Michael had mango worms which were very painful.

Thursday 16th October

Quite often we have a power cut in the evenings – this means that the kids have to do homework by candlelight. Yesterday the power went off in the afternoon, which meant that many buildings had no water by shower time. Many of us fetched buckets from one outside tap. The boys stood at the tap in their swimming shorts and got washed with a hosepipe.

Sunday 23rd November

I would like to record the positive side of Keur Massar. God has done so much in the lives of the senior boys. They led the service this morning, and each one of them spoke from his heart and really encouraged the worship. They were each sure that God had put us here for a reason and that we were to reach out to and pray for Keur Massar.

Years later we can record with joy that there is now a new church in an area next to K.M. that was under construction while we were there. The boys used sometimes to go out and prayer walk in the area.

We have examined our routines, and why we do things a certain way. We have learned to co-operate better and make do with less. Resourcefulness has increased, and the children have learned to cope with a lot of difficulties. We are co-operating closely together as a staff team. We are praying earnestly – both adults and children.

As I have mentioned, we had just two rooms and a basic bathroom. There was no kitchen, so in the holidays when we had to cook for ourselves we used the school kitchen. In the Christmas holiday, two families and several singles shared the cooker – sometimes it was fun, but at other times there was tension such as you might find in any community situation. The best thing about it all was the meals our three children volunteered to cook for us, managing with hilarity under the most difficult conditions. There was always a mountain of washing up, but the morale booster was worth it!

In the holidays we would read a story each night by the light of a paraffin lamp. It was something simple to look forward to at the end of each day.

In April and May 1998 we had a lot of sickness, and all of us except Steve were ill in a repeated cycle. It turned out to be a kind of tick-borne relapsing fever. We were all put on antibiotics. Steve had five trips to the pharmacy to collect the tablets - he had to order them, and they kept not being there. When he finally collected them we were down to seven tablets between three of us. Just in time - thank you Lord!

Our youngest son, Peter, continued to be ill throughout May. He had a brain scan and was diagnosed with viral encephalitis. Thankfully we were only 25 miles from the only CT scanner in a sub region of several countries. He was in hospital for 8 days, but made a good recovery. This was a very difficult time, but we received so much love and support from the staff team. Everyone was very kind to us. Somehow we were running GCSE exams for the Year 11 girls in between trips to the hospital.

So....what about Covid 19?

The Covid 19 situation reminds us of our experiences in 1997 and 1998. God always has new lessons for us to learn, but sometimes we need to relearn the old ones.

The evacuation that we went through was a profound experience and it remains in the heart long after the event. It taught us more about Jesus. He was willing to go to great lengths in suffering for us and 'it is enough for the disciple to be like his master'.

It is OK to be upset. It is part of the coping mechanism. We are shocked and going through a grief process and it comes around and hits us, just as it did during our evacuation. Several times each day we ask ourselves 'Is this really happening?' We did it then and we are doing it again now.

Back then the future was unknown. We didn't know whether it would get better or worse. Eventually it did get better. The baby that I was holding on that day, 30th August 1997, is now at Cambridge University studying to be a vet. Of the two GCSE girls, one is now a missionary mum herself and the other is a physiotherapist, married with two children. Most of the school students from the evacuation era are following the Lord today, some in very challenging situations. We didn't want our children to go through these painful

events....yet it seemed in the long term that what mattered most was not the situation itself, but the way in which we reacted. That is true now, as well.

Some things helped us then, and the same things are helping me now.

- Live one day at a time.
- Look for something good each day, something that you can thank God for. It can be a very little thing. At Keur Massar we had noise, dust, basic conditions...but also beautiful tropical wild birds.
- Look up at the night sky and enjoy the stars. It costs nothing and you can practise social distancing while you do it.
- Value and cherish relationships. They are more precious than the things we own.
- Express your feelings to God. He is OK with our anger, frustration and tears. He'll bring us through it.

Thank you for reading. May God bless you and strengthen you at this time.

Gill Bryant 29th March 2020