

Chaplain Debbie in Southwest Tangyanika

*Extracts from Debbie's journal 15 September to 13 December 2023.
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So, the day finally dawned, and I was going. Months of preparation with few hesitations, I confess to feeling a touch anxious as I closed the door to my home for the last time. However, I was soon buoyed up by the wonderful farewell the Chaplaincy at Manchester Airport gave me, with coffee, prayers and a high vis escort to the aircraft. Then it was just me.....

As a newly fledged Church in Wales Pastoral Chaplain, I felt privileged to be presented with such an opportunity.

It's an odd feeling when no one meets you. There's an even more odd feeling when an airport closes and you're still waiting five hours later! The Diocesan drums were beaten and along came a driver from Mbeya who whisked us through traffic jams, roadblocks, around piki-piki (motorcycle) cyclists transporting coffins, mattresses and all sorts, and onwards along the TransZam Highway; a single right turn and on to Njombe, and a very warm welcome.

Awaking at 04.30, I tottered through the cold, misty garden to my kitchen to make tea, bread, banana and honey. Yesterday, I found UHT milk in a bag! The simplicity and purity of this place struck me as a bee plopped out of the honey bottle onto my bread.

It felt uniquely, and rather emotionally exceptional, to receive my first Holy Communion in Tanzania, and even as I write, a lump develops in my throat as I reflect on how it came to be, that God brought me here.....

More soberingly, we moved on to one of Tanzania's seven schools for deaf children. My heart strings were well and truly tugged as those beautiful children communicated with their teachers in sign-language. Their own special way of learning, in their own silent worlds.

Then there's the dalah-dalah; local buses which reach parts no other buses can reach. They are full to the brim, always. Laden dangerously, human beings vacuum packed within, and precarious mountains of possessions stowed on the roof above. I will try one, one day!



A lack of confidence here, to enter a shop, is a severe disability; you just have to go for it and pass under hanging blankets, pillows, and clothes to enter the tiny shop within stacked floor to ceiling with goods. Then seek, find, negotiate just a little, and emerge with radiant happiness that you managed to buy a pack of *chupi*!

Njombe has few 'places to eat' although Hilary said *Shalom* sells very good snacks. There are street vendors grilling cobs of corn and doubtful fragments of meat, but I'm leaving those for now. The other thing about Njombe is dust...

The lady, very nicely dressed sitting next to me in the English Service, didn't appear to know what we were doing or what page we were on, so I kept helping her. She left before we received Communion, which I thought rather strange, thinking she must feel very out of place. Later, in the Swahili service, the sermon was very long, very loud, and delivered with extreme passion. She was now robed, and head covered, the lady preacher who had been sitting next to me during the English service.

As we poured out of the Cathedral, we each received a tiny piece of bright pink cake on a toothpick in a napkin. It's these simple things which make it so special here. Sugar is so terribly expensive.

The Confirmations were wonderful with 18 youngsters lining up for their Blessing and First Communion, all followed by much singing and dancing in praise of their achievement. Lunch was served as always post any celebration, and this was a banquet.....We returned to Njombe, belly's full to the brim, heads nodding in contented, sleepy satiation.



By Friday I felt restless, but Father Mathiya called by and said we would be going on a special safari (journey in this context). We would go to an Evangelical Conference at Manda by Lake Nyasa. What an adventure! My spirits soared! I was longing to go to Lake Nyasa.....

With dusk falling, we began a long descent from the highlands, rounded a bend and there it was a golden shimmer of water. Lake Nyasa at last. After photographs to mark our arrival, I was anxious to reach the waterside oasis of my dreams and take a cool drink by lapping waters, but we turned left away from the lake, and instead arrived at a small, dusty community where Father Mathiya announced "Thank the Lord, we arrived safely!" The shattering of dreams inevitably shows on one's face, but I was determined to be as always, prepared for anything. What followed though, I was *completely* unprepared for....

The new orphanage was almost ready. I do love painting, and a few comments from home said, "you can't even go to Africa without sniffing out a paint brush!" Bishop set to as well, and it was all hands-on deck to get things moving.



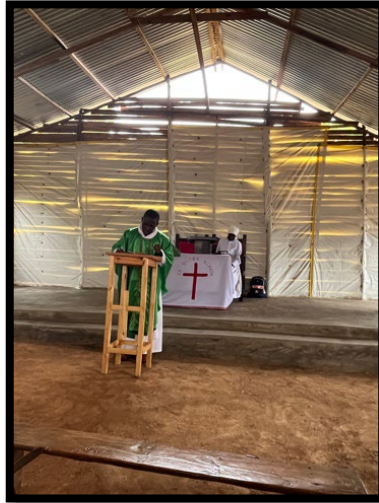
We departed in the pitch-black early hours of the following morning. The southern hemisphere stars were *amazing*. My heart had palpitated all night and my head pounded. Never have I been so fearful of my health. Actually, it was an exceptional experience, all of it.....

.....we ran past hundreds of buses, avoided baggage, sacks, people, traders, puddles like lakes and dangerous curbs with big drops. There it was, New Force! Blue lights blazing around its entire shape, the conductor called "mzungu Deborah?" Unbelievable!! I boarded the bus and two minutes later, Blue Force was in a mad race along the three-lane motorway with all the other 05.00 departing long distance buses. I shut my eyes and prayed.

How bizarre to climb into the comfort of a Land Cruiser (instead of a bus) and set off on a 5-hour drive through the night with a *Bishop* I've never encountered. He probably thought much the same. He told me to call him Donald! We chatted a little until the bumps of the road distorted words and jarred our bones.

The day was cold and miserable, somewhat appropriate for Remembrance Sunday, so I set off for my lunch treat at the Hillside Hotel, this time sitting inside by a log fire instead of enjoying the peaceful, sunny gardens. I kept my own private 2-minute silence, in my own little corner of Tanzania.

We walked past a tiny shop, over mounds of earth and down a passage, and there was a simple, rustic church of rough timber slats and polythene, topped by a tin roof. Its beauty lay within. Such beauty.



The bus was prettily adorned with stickers of Dutch tulip fields, but its condition was truly past it's prime. My legs cramped against a sack of potatoes and my head was pushed onto the shoulder of the lady next to me. Breathing alone became quite a challenge and the heat intensified mélanged with the usual carbon monoxide smoke filtering through the floor. Happy, laughing, chatty people: ladies in dresses of colourful fabrics: children with curling lashes and shiny fresh skin, only the cockerel got a thumbs down, otherwise I loved it! Five hours later, we arrived.



Idunda is in the middle of nowhere but has a substantial church, as well as a vast church hall for weddings, funerals, parties and all sorts. We were invited, as the hour was very early, to take tea, donut shaped *mandazi* and boiled eggs..... Afterwards, we returned to the dining room for an early lunch. Rice, ugali, greens, chicken legs in soup and lumps of pork. Just what I needed at 11.30 am! We bounced our way back to Njombe on the rutted red road, the pig dancing merrily with the chicken on a soft cushion of doughnut.

The time came; the arrival of my last day in Njombe. I potted off to the kitchen to make tea as usual and this morning, the sisters were singing softly. I shall miss that sound.

As the sun rose, it's orange light illuminated the rich, ochre soil deepening its intensity. Women moved gracefully along the road carrying heavy loads on their heads ready for another day of hard labour in their fields.

'Sister Debbie'
Njombe
Tanzania

