

March Prayer Points 3

Those who do not have time to read the stories may still get the main points in under two minutes by scanning the red print and looking at the photos.

Dear Friends:

A few days ago I reported on the strategy shaping our three-fold ministry in Mozambique and gave a summary on the present state of the work. In the next three reports, I want to focus on some of the individuals God is using in the church work.

But first, to appreciate the satisfaction derived from the church today, here is a little background on the frustrations and disappointments of the past.

Our church, Fellowship of Believers in Christ, was established in 1993 starting with nine men who had responded to the hospital evangelistic ministry and had been disciplined for one to three years in home Bible studies. During the next twenty years, six of the nine founding members left the Evangelical faith. One of the remaining three men departed our church at a time of crisis and suffered several hard disappointments in life, ultimately dying from AIDS ten years ago. The remaining two individuals have borne much fruit and remain faithful leaders of the church today. They are Arnaldo Aquiles and Costódio Gustavo, men for whom I am deeply grateful.



Church leaders Costódio Gustavo (left) and Arnaldo Aquiles

Until 1999, our church had a troubled existence. Errors introduced at the time of its founding hindered the church until 1998 when it was re-structured more biblically. In the course of that controversial transformation, opposition that scarred our ministry for years arose from a few who were disenfranchised.

One of those individuals became a veritable thorn in the flesh for me, making prodigious efforts to have me expelled from the country by propagating egregious falsehoods that he carried all the way to the governor's office. Thankfully the governor ordered an investigation by the department of justice instead of expelling me. I was soon exonerated, but it was distressing to hear the stories that had been circulated and believed about me.

Sometime later, the same individual had me arrested and detained overnight on the same fabricated charges. When the chief of police investigated the case the next day, I was again exonerated and released, with the disgruntled former church member being jailed in my place for conning the police. A short time later, while I was away on furlough, rumors were sown that I had been arrested by the vice squad and was serving a prison sentence in the capital.

It was obvious to me that this "brother" was a wolf in sheep's clothing because I knew all of his charges were pure fabrications. He was so skilled in deception, however, that people far and wide not only trusted him implicitly, but many followed him, and some made him their pastor. I longed for God to publicly cast His vote between us right then, but as countless people before me have learned, one must

patiently endure such circumstances until God has used them to accomplish all His inscrutable purposes.

Over time my adversary lost his wealth and following; his various enterprises all collapsed; his congregation turned on him and then fell apart; he abandoned his wife and children, abandoned his second wife, gave up his vocation, and spent several terms in jail. Today this once respected and trusted leader has sunk back to living a primitive life in the bush far away from his ruined reputation here in the city. Indeed, the stone he was rolling fell back on him – but only many years later when none but his victims would correlate his demise with the calumny he had heaped upon others.

The result of those trials was a re-formed church in the year 2000 that has been a constant blessing. We lost 59 of our adult participants, shrinking down to a church of only five members. Before long we grew to 20 members, but have never gone beyond that since old members have been transferred away as often as new people have joined. In the past year, for example, we gained four members, but in the same interval lost the same number due to people being transferred to other towns.

With so many people moving away, we are especially thankful for those God has allowed to remain and for what He has been accomplishing in their lives! Here begins a brief introduction to the key brothers and sisters in our church:



Jeremias Antonio – Jeremias was a junior high dropout who for many Sundays slouched in the back row of our church before mysteriously catching fire for the Lord. As far as I know, no one in the church paid any attention to him until he started coming to the Saturday morning studies and began racing through the Bible passages in the weekly scripture memorization program that followed the lessons. Despite his limited education, Jeremias completed all 48 pages of memory work in only three months, the fastest anyone has ever done it.

I was impressed with Jeremias' sudden comprehension of and appetite for spiritual things and his desire to practice what he recited. The scripture memory program is part of a brotherly helps ministry where people who really need financial assistance can earn it through memory work. Jeremias is the only person who ever asked that 10% of his earnings be automatically turned over to the church, and I obliged him. We do not teach tithing per se in our church, but he was convicted by verses from the O.T. he had been memorizing. In Mark 4:24-25 God promises to match our spiritual comprehension to our obedience, and though still a youngster, a relatively new believer, and lacking in formal education, the next year Jeremias took the systematic theology course with the pastors and church leaders at the Fiel conference and made the ninth all time highest score (amongst 121 participants). Today, Jeremias may be our best preacher. He uses the expository method and hits the mark with me often in his penetrating applications and vivid illustrations.

Upon his spiritual awakening, Jeremias at once became an avid evangelist. His remarkable transformation caught the attention of many friends who began coming to church with him. One of the features of his transformation was a

resolve to go back to school and to move out of the home where his mother was practicing “the world’s oldest profession.” He has doggedly persevered in his plan to complete high school, even though he has had to support himself the entire time and had to start over from the 7th grade because the school where he previously studied lost his Junior High academic records. He is now 21 years old and in the 11th grade.

Jeremias is one of our two composers of church music. He is the answer to decades of prayers that God would raise up an African poet and musician with sound theology and genuine Christian experience to produce indigenous African church music.

Africans are incredible at singing and dancing, but there is usually meager content in the lyrics. In our church, we have had to use western hymns translated into Portuguese. I am thrilled that God has finally answered our prayers in correcting this deficiency in our congregation and in the local church culture!



Jeremias is second from the left

Though the lyrics lose much of their impact when translated out of the original language and then divorced from their distinctively African harmony and syncopation, here is a sample of Jeremias’ music:

Receive Me, Oh Receive Me!

Unto Thee O my Lord do I cry
If You should reject I must die.
Oh give unto me your salvation!
In sin and perdition I lie!

Chorus:

Receive me, dear Christ, Oh receive me!
Condemned in great sin though I be,
Believing you died for poor sinners
I cast myself wholly on Thee!

Fast bound by the chains of its sin
My fainting heart unto Thee groans.
“Cleanse me, O Lord, would you cleanse me,
And welcome me into your home!”

O Lord how I long to be perfect,
But weakness within makes me faint.
‘Tis You who alone can save wretches,
Through love transform sinner to saint.

Death of a Christian

Be not so sad, Oh my brother!
I go to a far better home.
And you, oh my friend, be not grieving.
A better place soon I will own.

Chorus:

To live for the Christian is Christ.
To die for the Christian is gain.
If you would believe in my Savior
In heaven you’ll see me again.

This day for you too will come hasting,
But where will your confidence be?
Your works cannot help you, but Jesus
Alone sets the prisoner free.

“Weep not,” oh my friends, says the Savior.
“This man is not dead, but asleep.”
‘Tis Jesus who will me awaken
And ever in heaven me keep!

More testimonies will come in the next installment.

By His grace,
Charles and Julie Woodrow