

April Prayer Points 2

Those who do not have time to read the stories may still get the main points in less than one minute by scanning the red print (there is none!) and looking at the photos.

Dear Friends:

Here is a story about:

Godparents, Africa-style

In Mozambique, godparents are taken very seriously. They fulfill singlehandedly the roles of pastor, groomsmen, bridesmaids, best friends, and both sets of parents in American marriages. The godparents are to provide the premarital counseling, organize the wedding, set up and run the reception, help cover a significant part of the expenses, and be the only attendants who stand with the bride and groom during the ceremony. In the eyes of the guests, if any aspect of the ceremony or reception goes wrong, the godparents are responsible. The godfather is to ensure the young man knows everything necessary to have a successful honeymoon experience, while the godmother does the same for the bride, and it is important to follow up the day after the wedding to make sure all went well the previous night. After the wedding, the godparents are lifelong counselors for any problems that arise in the home. During the three days leading up to the wedding, the godparents are to be with the bride and groom continuously, day and night – the godfather with the groom, the godmother with the bride.



The wedding party at the church



Our HAPPY wedding couple – Leo and Isma

It is humorous that one reason for the latter requirement is to keep either party from getting cold feet and fleeing the city! This does happen at times, to everyone else's dismay. In Mozambique, Julie and I have never attended an African church ceremony where the wedding couple did not look like they were being led to their execution. Though everyone else is singing and dancing joyously, the feted couple lets out nary a smile, and the words sung by the guests and friends are encouragements to be brave and not back out!

There is good reason to approach the wedding ceremony with great fear here, because the bride and groom scarcely know each other in more than a superficial sense if they follow the local customs for courtship. A young man cannot approach a young woman to get acquainted with her without first sending a third party to talk with the father expressing the young man's desire to marry his daughter. If the father approves, the would-be suiter has to purchase a wedding ring as well as other gifts and give them to the girl's family to keep as a token of his earnestness. Only then, after committing to marry the girl, can the young man talk to the girl and spend time

with her finding out what she is really like! Before long, announcements have gone out and arrangements are being made for the upcoming union, such that backing out is increasingly difficult as the days pass. It would not surprise me if indeed many couples come to the wedding day with great misgivings about what they have committed themselves to do!

This was not the way things were done in our case, of course, and we were pleased that contrary to culture, our bride and groom were joyful and beaming all through the day-long event, as should be the case in any Christian wedding!



The three moms late in the day: Leo's mom, godmother Julie, and Isma's mom Mussite, Muslim wife of my colleague Arnaldo

Godparents also have responsibility for receiving all the wedding gifts for safekeeping until the bride and groom can carry them away to their new home. The gifts are opened by the wedding couple and godparents together, with the godparents permitted to take whatever gifts they would like for themselves in recompense for their significant investment of money, time, and effort in the wedding day and in the future lives of the couple. The actual biological parents are not responsible for anything apart from the engagement party, though all family members and close friends do contribute food, dishes, tables, chairs, and other items needed for the reception. Best friends are recognized not by standing with the bride and groom during the ceremony, but by waiting on tables at the reception.



The evangelistic pavilion prepared for the wedding



Final touches being added

In our case, the bride was Arnaldo's daughter, Ismaela. Ismaela and all her siblings enjoyed many sleep-overs with our kids growing up, and she wanted to stay with Julie in our home in the days before the wedding. That made life easy for Julie. I expected to stay with the groom, and was relieved when he assured me that was unnecessary as he could get himself to the altar without being pulled on a leash by me. However, I learned a lesson I will not soon forget about deviating from time-tested traditions. On each of the two days prior to the wedding, the groom failed to show up at either of the wedding rehearsals he himself requested. Everyone else was there, including a forlorn and pensive bride, so the groom's absence was most



Reception area at rear of the mission property

perplexing. By local standards, the money he had spent on wedding arrangements was staggering. It came to more than Julie and I had invested in our American wedding, though that was 26 years ago! As godparents, Julie and I contributed a normal amount to the wedding, but our couple had grander plans that the groom had to finance himself. I quipped to everyone present that though Leo had missed both rehearsals, I was sure he would be present

for the actual wedding since Matthew 6:21 assures us that where one's treasure is, there will his heart be also, and everyone knew where Leo had put all his money!

But to my shock, even on the day of the wedding, the groom was nowhere to be seen! The brief ceremony at the civil magistrate began at 9:00, followed by the wedding at the church later in the morning. The groom and I were supposed to meet

at 8:00 and then I would accompany him to the civic center with the bride arriving later in another vehicle. But at 8:00 there was no groom, nor at 8:15, nor at 8:30, nor at 8:40! As happens in desperate situations, the phone system for the city was down and there was no way to call the groom to find out what had become of him. Finally at 8:45 I left alone for the civil magistrate, who had a full morning of back-to-back weddings scheduled, to plead with him not to cancel the government's ceremony, which must take place for a marriage to be recognized legally! By 9:00, everyone was assembled in the civic center for the event – but still no groom and no bride! At 9:20 we would all have to clear out to make room for the next wedding party. The day was not starting out well for these foreign-looking god-parents, and I expect there may have been a few knowing glances exchanged by the older, experienced Africans pre-sent.



The "bridesmaids and groomsmen" serve at the reception waiting tables and do most of the work preparing for the big event!

At home, the bride was still undergoing beauty preparations administered by a private hairdresser who had arrived at 4:30 that morning with all his sophisticated equipment. At 9:00 Julie and several other attendants were urging the bride to just get in the car and go, but to no avail.



Finally the phone system came back up and I was able to talk with the groom who had arrived at the hospital forty minutes late and was still there waiting for me, though I had long since departed. So the groom hired a taxi to get to the wedding and the bride finally departed in all her glory in the decorated bridal car, but by the time each arrived at the civic center their time slot had passed and the next wedding was already underway!

Thankfully, the government officials simply charged a stiff fine (which the godparents had to pay – naturally) and worked our wedding in between the next two ceremonies. It meant the whole schedule for us was now set back by nearly an hour, but thankfully the rest of the day went as planned!



The table of honor with parents and godparents of the wedding couple, and a stunning wedding cake prepared by missionary colleague Hester Austin

Because the groom had a well paying job, this was a formal, “high society” wedding, much different from the humble ceremonies our church normally conducts. All our previous weddings have been incorporated into special Sunday worship services followed by simple receptions hosted by the church at no cost to the married couple. Our couples undergo a premarital counseling course taught from the Bible, and if the leaders are satisfied the pair is spiritually, emotionally, and financially ready for marriage, the church has opted to pitch in and make the event happen with a minimum of expense for the newlyweds, given that the vast majority of Mozambicans are so poor.



But our method is not normal here. Wedding feasts are a grand event in African culture, especially in Nampula where feasting of any sort is infrequent, and many churches will not schedule a ceremony until the groom has purchased sufficient food (still on the hoof sometimes) to show he can support a credible feast. I suspect there may be some concern about the church embarrassing itself if the wedding day does not come up to standard. Grand

feasts, however, are financially crippling to poor couples and can cause long marriage postponements depending on the extravagance required by the church or the bride's family. Obstacles do need to be placed in the way of ill-advised or hasty marriages, and it is reasonable to make the groom demonstrate some financial ability before taking on a wife, but some church members end up foregoing a Christian ceremony altogether simply because they cannot afford to feed a multitude of guests! That is what we want to avoid.

For the next installment, I have asked Grace to give a teenage view of life and ministry in Mozambique. Then, for those interested in even more local color, I will send two more stories of non-ministry experiences the past year that illustrate what it is like to be a missionary in Nampula.

By His grace,
Charles and Julie Woodrow

**Gifts to this ministry can be sent to: Grace Missions, c/o Faith Community Church,
723 South D. Street, Oxnard, CA 93030**