

Rev Jon Sermon

Sabbatical Report: June, July, August 2023

Background

I was ordained as a URC Minister in 2006 and could have taken a sabbatical in 2016. However, I was in the process of moving Pastorate and, after an initial settling in period, the retirement of my self-supporting minister colleague and then Covid, it was appropriate to defer it until now.

My interest in Africa can be traced right back to my time at boarding school. Two of my dormitory mates were boys from Kenya and their tales of Africa caught my imagination. They were from wealthy, white families and represented a privileged minority, no way representative of the whole picture, but nonetheless exciting.

Into adulthood, my interest grew, but the opportunity to travel to Africa never arose until I was training for ordination: As an overseas placement during training, I was able to travel to Uganda in 2005, as part of a team delivering Bible teaching to student pastors. The visit was arranged by Rev Dr John Hall, founder and then Director of the charity, Romans 1.11 Trust.



I had met John several years earlier and was aware of Romans 1.11 and I asked him to organise a suitable trip, to address the training aims of the overseas placement.

Romans 1.11 was founded to foster “mutual encouragement” between churches in the UK and Africa. At that time, it was primarily working in Uganda & Zambia and a major focus of the Trust’s work was its training programmes for pastors.

I had thought this would be a ‘once in a lifetime’ experience. God had other ideas, and my 2nd Uganda visit was in 2006. But, thereafter, there was a gap.

In 2007, John approached me to pray about becoming a trustee of the charity and, believing this to be God’s calling, I did so. At that stage, I stayed home while John & others continued travelling. I was, however, able to host Ugandan pastors visiting the UK. But in 2013, as John prepared to retire, he asked me to take the lead responsibility for the work in Uganda. From then on, until Covid interrupted, I visited every year.

Sabbatical Subject and Purpose

Whilst I already have a substantial understanding in cross cultural mission & ministry in an African context, I wanted to pursue this further. The Sabbatical offered, not only a longer, deeper trip to Uganda, but also the opportunity for my wife to join me for part of the trip. I could also visit two more African Countries, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

I also visited churches in the UK before, between and after the African trips. I had hoped to find some to visit who have a significant number of Africans in their congregations but this was not successful. However, I have visited 7 churches in other parts of the UK to give presentations about what I am experiencing and learning. More such visits are still to come.

I have also taken some time to reflect. This is still ongoing, but already the experience is having an impact.

Brief Outline of the Programme

Zimbabwe – 9-27 June:

Firstly: A 4-day programme of Bible teaching at Paraclete Presbyterian College on the outskirts of Harare.

Secondly: A Summit with the Zimbabwe Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. The Presbytery are in partnership with our Eastern Synod and I was able to represent it. They also have a far more developed and substantial partnership with the Presbytery of Denver in the USA. The focus was on partnership and included a visit to Bulawayo and visits to projects both near Bulawayo and near Harare.



in Zimbabwe with young men learning bricklaying.

Thirdly: The General Assembly of the whole denomination which spans 4 countries. It was being held in Zimbabwe because the incoming Moderator, Rev Lydia Nashanwe, is Zimbabwean and I was able to stay on for part of it representing the Eastern Synod.

Uganda – 6 July- 12 August:

I was in Uganda for most of the time. We had a programme of visits to partner churches and the 3 current pastor training centres. This involved travel across most of the Southern half of the Country. I was joined by my wife, Ruth, and we were able to go at a slower pace than usual and include some days of rest and reflection. We also celebrated our 40th Wedding Anniversary with a day visit to Queen Elizabeth National Park.

(Ruth, my wife, speaking at Ruti Church, Mbarara, with Richard Tusime interpreting.)



We were due to be joined by Rachel Thomas, a fellow trustee of Romans 1.11 Trust and our part-time Administrator. Sadly, Rachel was unwell and unable to fly. The news came just two days before she was due to travel, and arranging for another Trustee to take her place was not possible. So, rather than continue the trip alone, I asked Rev Richard Tusiime, General Secretary of our major partner, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Uganda, to accompany me in Rachel's place.

Overall:

- We drove about 2,000km – much on very rough roads.
- We visited 13 churches and preached in most of them.
- We visited 8 church-run schools and engaged with staff & students.
- We visited 3 of our pastor training centres and had mentoring sessions with the student pastors.
- We delivered 7 one-day seminars to gathered groups from numerous churches in the areas concerned.
- We witnessed God at work in tremendous ways.
- We experienced mutual encouragement – both giving and receiving.

Kenya - 12-16 August

A very short, but very intensive visit. I had come to know Rev Davies Musigo through youth ministry on Zoom. In 2021, as part of the Dunamis Fellowship Global Upward Challenge, I served as intercessor and small group facilitator for Davies and the church youth group. We remained in touch and had tried but failed to meet in Uganda last year. He asked me to visit as part of my sabbatical.

UK – (before, between and after African visits)

Visits to 7 UK churches, giving feedback on the African experience.

What happened?

To sum this up along the lines 'all went well' would be too simplistic. There were complications, challenges and difficulties at many stages. However, there were also examples of God bringing good out of bad situations, wonderful 'break through moments' and a huge degree of encouragement.

Throughout the 4 days teaching in Zimbabwe, most of the day seminars in Uganda and the main teaching slot in Kenya, the major emphasis was Biblical teaching on the Person & Work of the Holy Spirit. This was what our partners were asking for as well as an area in which I and others associated with Romans 1.11 have experience. The reality of some streams of church in the UK having dismissed and downplayed the Holy Spirit over history has an influence in Africa too. But the bigger problem they face is that there often is an openness to spiritual reality, yet with a tendency to look for it in the wrong places. I have come across frustrated Pastors trying to get through that to worship on Sunday and consult the witch doctor on Monday isn't the way to go!

And sadly, the influence of 'prosperity gospel' preaching is widespread among people who, so often, are materially poor. There seems to be an appetite in many African

countries – including these 3 – for showmanship leaders with ministries to wow the crowds. There have even been examples of church leaders so keen to impress with 'signs and wonders' that they have sought help from witch doctors to mimic the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Doesn't that remind us of Acts 8 & Simon the sorcerer?

Against this backdrop, along with the reality of young believers finding themselves called by God into leadership, yet with little or no prospect of sound theological training, the churches are crying out for such teaching. In all 3 countries the positive feedback was overwhelming.

And the next most intensive teaching area sat alongside this: Servant Leadership. The need to emphasise this in a culture of 'celebrity leaders' is something I had learned of over 18 years of travelling in Uganda, but which was further reinforced on this trip.

The name of Romans 1.11 Trust comes from Paul writing (Romans 1.11) "I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong". Yet v12 is just as important to us, where he adds "that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith". Mutual Encouragement is a theme of the Charity's work.

Whilst the biblical teaching, day seminars and mentoring sessions with students undoubtedly did amount to 'bringing some spiritual gift' and greatly encouraged many people, I found the things I continue to learn from the Africans, and the encouragement they brought me almost overwhelming. Highlights included:

- 'Old Friends' welcoming Ruth (who they had never met, but they knew of as someone who prays for them) which such exuberance.
- Meeting new people, not only in Uganda but in Zimbabwe & Kenya. And finding that bonding in the Lord, like my long experience in Uganda, in each and every case.
- The sheer whole-hearted worship
- The hunger for the Word of God
- Meeting growing churches, often flourishing in the face of adversity
- Yet seeing many, also, struggling with very difficult conditions – and unwaveringly trusting God.
- People really living out the Joy of the Lord as their strength (Nehemiah 8:10)
- Specific encouragement, in a remote Ugandan village near Jinja, where one of our partners moved to plant a church just before Covid lockdown. The area was dominated by a witch doctor and steeped in ancestral worship, belief that a 'god' lives in a special tree and other 'traditional religion' practices. So far as we know, there had never previously been a church in the community. Now there are well over 100 Christians worshipping together and we met several of the 21 who were baptised the previous Sunday. There have been examples of both physical and spiritual healing. The spiritual atmosphere has been transformed to such an extent that the witch doctor has left the area.
- Alongside the huge disappointment of Rachel being unable to join the mission – for us all and of course for Rachel herself, sat the blessing of unexpectedly having Richard join me in her place. Romans 1.11 could not have contemplated the expense of having a local join us. But having booked accommodation ahead, which we had to pay for, it became the practical solution. There were several examples when Richard's presence proved to be most valuable,

including a group of churches whose leadership had been planning to separate from the denomination. Without this God given opportunity, Richard would not have known of their intentions, nor had the opportunity to travel and spend time with them. He is newly appointed to the role of General Secretary and I had already seen him exercise God given diplomacy skills in a difficult situation last year. In this case, the fact that he was with me and able to spend time with local leaders has resulted in resolution of misunderstandings and a renewed commitment to grow together.

- Richard's presence also deepened our personal friendship and gave me opportunities to learn from him.

Some initial Reflections

The process of learning and personal growth will be ongoing for many years to come. But it has started:

As well as adding greatly to my knowledge and experience of Uganda, in a way that simply would not have been possible without the time and financial help of being on Sabbatical, the visits to both Zimbabwe and Kenya have added a new perspective.

I have seen similarities and differences between the 3 countries and the churches I have shared experience with in all 3 countries.

Similarities include vibrant worship, sincerity of heart for God, and faith that makes a difference. This month's 'Christianity' magazine included article entitled 'Reverse Mission': Rev Dr Isreal Olofinjana writes of his own experience coming from Nigeria to the UK as a missionary and wider implications. I have seen, perhaps more powerfully than before, how African Christians have a crucial part to play. As Dr Olofinjana puts it "to remind the Western Church to stay faithful in the face of aggressive secularism". The wholehearted approach to faith of so many Africans is an encouragement indeed!

Zimbabwe showed me many similarities with my previous Uganda experience, alongside some contrasts. Worship was somewhat more formal and restrained than in Uganda, and more liturgical – indeed nearer to our UK 'norms'.

Poverty and financial struggles in the churches proved very similar, but with an added complication. Ministers of the UPCSA are usually provided with a manse and do receive a stipend (irregularly or intermittently paid at times). The RPCU in Uganda, a young denomination that emerged largely from the underground church of Idi Amin's era, does not pay stipends. Some pastors receive a degree of support from the 'tithes & offerings' of the congregation. A few also make their home within the church buildings: Often a 1 or 2 room outbuilding becomes a place for the pastor to stay.

The UPCSA, Zimbabwe Presbytery undoubtedly have more developed financial structures than the RPCU. They have a Central Fund and farming projects to generate income. They are supported by the partnerships with Denver and us. The Central Fund is intended to provide for these needs. Nevertheless, manses and stipends seem to put an unmanageable strain on their resources.

And the farming projects appeared precarious, often facing a new series crisis before the previous one is resolved.

I also saw a great deal of extreme poverty (as I do every time in Uganda, and I also saw very starkly in Kenya). This is the main 'shopping centre' of the township "Kwadzana 6" where Paraclete College is situated, on the edge of Harare:



And this is the College venue (front building under construction, security gate indicative of the crime risk in the area. I was not allowed outside the compound unaccompanied) :



Yet the contrast with the wealth in the 'better' parts of Harare, Bulawayo and other cities was stark. Poverty seemed even more extreme than most of Uganda, but the country showed signs of greater development than Uganda, historically, but with a lot of progress having apparently been lost since UDI ended. Nevertheless, those in privileged positions seem wealthy. One indication was that there were far more upmarket and nearly new cars than you see in Uganda.

Kenya was, inevitably, a limited 'snapshot' of one aspect, although a visit to central Nairobi showed an even starker contrast between the 'haves & have nots'! And whilst I have witnessed extreme poverty in Uganda and Zimbabwe, I had not experienced quite the same 'hands on' engagement as I did with Davies. He had deliberately planted the church in the heart of a slum (it is officially called that) . The church is a Christian presence in an area of extreme need. Almost 1 million people live a 'ghetto' existence there.



The church is called Huruma Tent of Prayer. Huruma is an area within the slum: The name means 'sanctuary' derived from a long history of



being a place where homeless people gathered and others would bring food and practical help.

Worship was inspiring but the most telling aspect was going on pastoral visits with Davies. I went into 4 homes, each one room, some



concrete, others corrugated iron. Literally having to jump over an open sewer to reach the doors of some of these homes was quite an experience. So was the welcome. What shocked and humbled me particularly was the attitude: These people felt that I had 'demeaned myself' by being willing to visit them in their circumstances. From my point of view, I was honoured to do so.

The church also run a school and a clean water project for the community.

One significant learning point was a danger to be very aware of: In all 3 countries, to varying extents, some of the people treated me like a celebrity visitor. Aspects of that can be pleasant and harmless, but there is a need to avoid the temptation of living up to the sort of status some would confer. Having taught about 'Servant Leadership' I needed to remain aware and be sure to live it out. And I need to be conscious of the risk of enjoying and valuing this too much, and thus find some aspects of 'normal' ministry back in the Pastorate mundane by comparison.

Possible Ways Forward

The ministry of Romans 1.11 Trust is separate from the Eastern Synod partnership with Uganda. Could there be a possibility of bringing the two closer together? Could there be an ongoing relationship with Kenya? These are big questions and subject to ongoing reflection and discussions. Romans 1.11 have been approached by other African countries in the recent past. The limiting factor has always been resources, both financial and personnel/time available. Could this change as God leads us?



Left: at Ssanje School in Rakai District, Uganda, with 2 children sponsored by a couple from Chelmsford.

Right: Worship at Ruti RPCU church, Mbarara, Uganda

