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Nigeria

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Wednesday, April 16

Four of us arrive at South Bend airport about one o'clock to begin our Nigerian journey. Merlene Ogden (Dean of Affiliations and Extension at Andrews) is our team leader. The other two are Bill Richardson (chair of the undergraduate Religion Department) and David Steen (a Professor in the Biology Department). The purpose of this trip is to conduct a regular "audit" (evaluation) at the Adventist Seminary of West Africa (ASWA), soon to become Babcock University. This is one of about ten international institutions affiliated with Andrews University so that they can offer Andrews degrees on their campuses.

My participation in this expedition was in some doubt until a couple of days ago. Obtaining permits from the Nigerian government for a visit such as this is very difficult, and when finally, the letters arrived, I was listed as an American citizen. Not having an American passport, the Washington embassy refused to grant me a visa, and there was much last-minute communication between Andrews and the Nigerian government before they finally issued a corrected letter of permission. So, I am here with my bags packed, ready for my second trip to Africa in less than a year.

I'm not sure that I really want to go to Nigeria. An ominous sign at South Bend airport warns intending travelers that the international airport at Lagos, Nigeria, does not meet international standards of security. It appears that no other airport in the world is deserving of this kind of public statement. However, together we prayed for the Lord's protection before we left Andrews University this afternoon, so we will trust in an all-powerful Father.

Thursday, April 17

In the early hours of the morning, our British Airways jet is somewhere over the northern Atlantic, en route from Chicago to London. The cabin is not crowded, so there is space to stretch a little and doze the time away. I have just been watching the new movie, "Shines", which is based on the true story of a young pianist and his dysfunctional Jewish family.

On arrival at Heathrow Terminal 4, we shuffle our way through immigration, then head for the special bus that conveys passengers between the two major London airports. Our flight to Lagos is due to depart from Gatwick airport at 11.00 am. Fortunately, our baggage was checked from South Bend through to Lagos.

At Gatwick, we discover that our Lagos flight departure is delayed two hours. This turns out to be four hours, so we collect free meal vouchers from the British Airways service desk. Seven pounds fifty is enough to purchase a reasonable meal at a fast-food restaurant and have some money left to buy Scottish shortbread and Swiss chocolates.

Our six-hour flight to Lagos finally gets off the ground about 3 p.m. which means that it is dark by the time we are flying over the Sahara Desert. I had hoped to see something of this vast, arid portion of the world. About 9 pm. we touch down at Lagos, and soon disembark to enter the muggy interior of the airport. Approaching the immigration line, we are met by the ASWA president, Dr. Alalade, who has used his influence to have us escorted directly to the customs area where we are to claim our baggage. The arrival experience

is quite smooth and efficient, except the final stage of getting through a narrow passage to the roadway where we are finally able to load everything into three vehicles and begin the journey through the suburbs of Lagos, then northwards towards ASWA.

Once at the campus, we are driven directly to our guest-house. It is now almost midnight, but there is a hot meal waiting for us. Although the interior of the house is unpleasantly humid, our bedrooms have air-conditioners installed, so we should find sleeping comfortable. At this stage we ask only for a hot shower and then bed. Unfortunately, since the water supply was turned off hours ago, we must forgo the first wish, and go to bed dirty after more than 24 hours of travel. However, we are each provided with bottled water for drinking. David Steen and I share a quite nicely furnished room with twin beds. There is a western-style toilet in an adjoining room, but we are admonished to use a flashlight, since a large python sometimes wraps himself around the toilet bowl during the night.

Left: Church; Right: Part of the large, rural campus, viewed from near the guest house.

Friday, April 18

One melatonin capsule worked for me last night, and I did not surface to reality until after 6 am.—this despite a noisy air-conditioner which could compete with a chaff-cutter. Bill is already up and occupying the bathroom, but complains that there is still no running water, so must be content with a sponge bath. Half an hour later, I am luckier and find the taps now producing water. There is no warm water in the house, but in this climate the cold water is refreshing. Right now, happiness is feeling clean again.

We are guests of President Alalade for breakfast this morning, so just before eight we walk the short distance along a red clay street to his house. During the meal, we learn that we are to accompany Alalade to a village north of the city of Ibadan, to attend the funeral of an Adventist lady who died some time ago at 100 years of age. One of her sons is an elected member of the legislative council of Nigeria, so some important dignitaries of the military government are expected to attend the event today. It is important for Dr. Alalade to attend, and he assures us that it will be of interest to us. It will be very hot in the church, he says, so we visitors will not be expected to wear jackets -- white shirt with tie will be enough. Soon after breakfast, we pile into cars—Bill and I ride in Alalade's Mercedes, Merlene and David in Janeric Gustavsson's Toyota pickup—and head northward. The main expressway to Ibadan is a good paved highway, but side roads tend to deteriorate quickly into rough sections with huge potholes.

This morning's drive into and through Ibadan will be long remembered for two things--the furious driving which would make Jehu look like a tortoise; and the nearly universal use of biblical names and phrases on roadside businesses, minibuses and highway trucks. We pass a stall selling "Rock of Ages Kerosene", a "God is My Salvation Beauty Salon", and right now we are recklessly overtaking a hopelessly overcrowded minibus operating on "God's Power". The minibus has so many passengers that the sliding passenger door is wide open, and the rear ends of two male passengers hang perilously over the roadway.

Turning off the highway, we drive a short distance into Erunmu village, and suddenly we are part of a milling throng of a thousand or more people who are dressed in colorful attire. Our drivers persuade the soldiers to allow our vehicles into an area close to the SDA Church (we are VIP's!). We are quickly escorted past a brass band playing swinging music, then into the church which is festively decorated with hundreds of colored balloons for this special funeral service. The church seats perhaps 300 people, but the crowd of attendees is so great that seating within the building is reserved for guests, officials, and family of the bereaved. Most of the crowd will be content to stand outside or find seats in a large tent nearby where the proceedings will be broadcast to them.

The four of us are ushered to special seating at the front of the church, partly facing the congregation. Practically everyone here is in colorful national dress, many with striking head pieces. There is an unmistakable atmosphere of scarcely controlled excitement, and a choir sings joyfully while we wait for the program to begin.

Funeral scenes for Mama Sarah Olasewe Oyelese at the Erunmu SDA Church, north of Ibadan.

We are given specially printed programs for the event. We read that Mama Sarah Olasewe Oyelese died last February 23, and is being buried today, April 18, almost two months later. Janeric Gustavsson is sitting behind me, so I ask him why the long delay. He says this is not unusual, because members of the family must sometimes travel from long distances, and they are expected to make, rent or purchase special dresses for the funeral. Among the prominent guests is Lieutenant General Diya, who is Chief of General Staff and second in command of the military government of Nigeria. There are also a dozen or more kings ("royal fathers") and state officials, some of them carrying elaborate scepters. A considerable amount of time is given to naming and welcoming all these people. General Diya is welcomed several times.

The coffin is now carried to the front of the church, the officiating ministers and others take their places, and the event is underway. This first funeral service--the "Passage Into Glory" --begins with a processional hymn, then for two or three hours we are entertained by an extravaganza of choral performances by several guest choirs, plus the ASWA King's Ambassadors male sextet, which receives enthusiastic applause. The songs are interspersed with scripture readings, prayers, announcements, and an evangelistic sermon preached in English by the president of the Nigerian SDA Union Mission, and translated into the local

Left: Nigerian government representatives.

Right: We are given VIP seating at the front of the church.

native language. The grand finale of this service--the singing of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus—features combined choirs accompanied by a brass group, electronic keyboard and organ.

The first service is now over, and the outdoor burial is to follow immediately. We are admonished to remain in the church, where there will be a musical interlude. At the last moment, however, someone obtains permission for us to join the crowd at the grave side behind the church, so we are escorted there by uniformed officers. Soldiers armed with rifles are positioned throughout this area, ready for action if the burial service deteriorates into something else. The grave side service lasts half an hour, the officiating minister's oft repeated "ashes to ashes, sand to sand" being heard against a backdrop of energetic praise music emanating from the church behind us.

The internment completed, everyone returns to their places in the church for the next event, which is the "Thanksgiving Service". This service consumes one and a half hours. Apart from more hymns, choral presentations, and a sermonette, the major event is the thanksgiving offering. This part of the service nearly blows me away. The immediate family of the bereaved, dressed in colorful regalia, and holding bowls and baskets, take their places at the front of the church. The brass strikes up a joyful African rhythm, and for the next thirty minutes or so we watch, mesmerized, as hundreds of guests, all in national dress, take their turn in slow dancing to the front and placing their offerings in the baskets. It is an exuberant affair, an African tradition, and the band plays on. Suddenly Janeric motions to us. Someone hands me a dollar bill, and Janeric tells me to join the procession in a slow movement to the front. I place my small donation in one of the baskets held by the smiling family members, then return to my seat. "You danced quite well," Janeric tells me afterwards. I think he is joking, but anything could have happened in the setting of that swaying hypnotic music.

It is now after 4 pm--we have been here nearly six hours--and the next event is a great feast in a nearby tent. This will last for many more hours, to be followed by yet another more private service. We are to be spared these final events. We are escorted back to our vehicles and are soon being driven home, as furiously as we came. This has been one amazing day.

Church interior prior to the service. And the burial at the rear of the church building.

Sabbath, April 19

Sometime during the night, the power fails. I awake with a start as our air-conditioner shudders into silence, and the ceiling fan winds down. We swelter for several hours until the power is restored.

Bill Richardson is to be the guest preacher at church today. Last night he dreamed there was a power failure in the middle of his sermon and he had to shout his message to the large congregation. We laugh and wonder whether the dream is prophetic.

We walk across campus to the large church which occupies a strategic position inside the entrance gates. The morning is hot and sticky, so we move without hurry along the red-soil drive that encircles the campus buildings, past some overgrown gardens and a grove of oil palms. At the church we are met and escorted to prominent seating near the front. Dozens of ceiling fans circulate the tepid tropical air.

Sabbath School over, we prepare for the service. Bill is somewhere in the middle of his fine sermon when his dream turns into a nightmare. Lights quit, the fans wind down, and he shouts his way to a conclusion. Seconds later, there is a flash of lightning, a loud thunder-clap, and the heavens burst open. The roar of torrential rain on the roof drowns out every sound. Soon deacons are bringing basins and buckets to collect large drops of water from several leaks in the roof. The annual wet season has arrived in Nigeria!

Tonight, we spend a couple of hours at the home of the Gustavssons. This Swedish missionary family are the only expatriates on the ASWA campus. Janeric is director of Development for ASWA. There are concerns for his family's safety in a country of widespread violence, so their campus house is guarded by several armed men for twenty-four hours a day. At their table, we enjoy cool drinks and a delectable Swedish dessert before returning to our living quarters.

Sunday, April 20

We enjoy a good measure of protection at our guest house. Two security guards, each armed with a loaded rifle, are always on duty. During the day, one of them sits on the front porch, while the other surveys the scene from the shade of a large mango tree outside. Somewhere in the middle of last night I woke suddenly to the sound of gunfire. I expected to hear a disturbance, but everything was quiet, so I drifted back to sleep. When we ask about it this morning, we are told that it is common for a shot to be fired into the air if there is any suspicion of an intruder, or sometimes just to warn anyone in the vicinity that the campus is protected.

This will be a busy day as we move into our audit program. After an ample breakfast served at the house, we walk to the administration building for a scheduled meeting with the main officers of the school, followed by a tour of the campus. Later, I spend some time with Mrs. Ikone, who is the acting librarian. The library is larger than I anticipated, but the shelves are stocked with large numbers of obsolescent material. The library occupies most of the top floor of the administration building.

A special seminar is scheduled tonight for all the faculty, and I am to talk to them about use of the library in their instructional programs. The teachers want to hear about some of the major changes affecting libraries and education, driven by the new electronic technologies. Here in Nigeria, however, access to global electronic information will have to wait until there is a more reliable infrastructure to support it. Power failures are a daily (and nightly) occurrence, and the telephone system is "down" most of the time. Telephone service to the campus remains inoperative throughout our six-day stay, and e-mail communication is possible only once or twice a week when Janeric Gustavsson travels the 100 kilometers to Lagos.

Left: Classroom building, library upstairs.

Right: Library interior.

Monday, April 21

Our lunch each day is eaten in a special guest dining area at the campus cafeteria. Typically, it consists of a plate of salad with fresh campus-baked bread, followed by a hot meal, accompanied with bottles of cold raspberry-flavored Malina -- a black Nigerian brew which tastes like root beer mixed with tooth paste. Breakfast and dinner are carried to our guest house from the cafeteria on the heads of two or three young ladies. One of them stays to prepare our table and serve the food. The meals are very good, with more variety than I expected, despite the rather primitive kitchen facilities on the campus. The ASWA bakery produces wonderful bread and peanut butter from local ground nuts.

I spend most of today at the library, examining the collection and making recommendations for collection development and changes in some library procedures. During one of the seemingly brief periods when the power is "up", I demonstrate a simple computer program which will assist the cataloging staff to develop a database of the library's holdings. While I'm there, a gentleman visitor comes to consult some library resources. He is a professor at the University of Ibadan and tells me he comes to "this excellent library" frequently to find information that is not available in his university library. I try to conceal my surprise! This evening, all four of us burn the midnight oil at the guest house, working together on a series of commendations and recommendations which will form the core of our audit report.

Campus views: men's dorm (top) and classroom building. Bottom: Elementary School.

Tuesday, April 22

Being less than eight degrees north of the equator, the coastal areas of Nigeria have hot weather year-round. There are two wet and two dry seasons. Our visit coincides with the start of the main wet season characterized by extremely muggy weather which produces storms and periods of very heavy rain. The soil is brick red in color, rather sticky when wet, as we discover when we walk the campus roads or trails after or during rain. None of the campus roads are paved, but there is a covered concrete pathway that links the administration building, classroom building, and cafeteria.

Today is busy as we have meetings with individual faculty or administrative officers, classroom and library visits. In a conversation with the treasurer, I am astonished to learn that the largest item in the personnel budget is for campus security. We attend the weekly student assembly at the church. Each of us has a short talk, then the ASWA male quartet, the "Ambassadors", presents a couple of songs.

Tonight, we are hosting a banquet for all the faculty and staff of ASWA, with their spouses. This means that the campus cafeteria is preparing an excellent meal, for which Andrews University will pay. We decide to run a short program after the meal and the inevitable speeches. Merlene has prepared a quiz for which there are prizes in the form of office supply items and Andrews University bookmarks. Bill Richardson tells a personal experience, with plenty of humor, I recite one of Henry Lawson's Australian poems, and David Steen has a "guess the tune" quiz with his harmonica. At the end of the show

we are each presented with gifts -- Nigerian tunics for ourselves and dresses for our spouses left at home, and a tape recording of the "Ambassadors" singing group. As a finale, Merlene presents a slide show of Andrews University scenes, which is interrupted by one of those inevitable power failures.

Wednesday, April 23

Most of this final day on the ASWA campus is spent preparing a report which we will present to a special faculty meeting this afternoon. We are utilizing two notebook computers as we work together on the report. By mid-day we have successfully transferred everything onto a diskette, but the challenge now is to get enough paper copies for distribution at the meeting. It takes us two hours to locate a computer and printer capable of making an original copy, and then to get copies made by the school's copy machine. The power fails just as the last copy rolls out of the machine, and there are more power outages during the faculty meeting that follows.

By five o'clock we have said our goodbyes, loaded our cases into two vehicles, and set off for Lagos airport. It seems that every Nigerian who drives a car is a generic Jehu, so there is absolutely no chance of our being anything other than wide awake during the two-hour drive. We encounter no traffic delays until we pass through one of the busy market areas of Lagos. The only rule in a Nigerian traffic jam is to breathe in and squeeze your car into whatever space you can find -- a sure recipe for total gridlock. Somehow, though, our drivers manage to butt their way by slow degrees through a crush of cars, trucks, buses, and street vendors selling everything from loaves of bread and other food items to trinkets and housewares. Perhaps only the most daring survives in this West African economy.

At Lagos airport, our ASWA hosts assist us through the check-in process, and share brown bags of sandwiches and cookies before we say our farewells and pass through the security fence. Once inside the departure terminal, we settle down to wait about three hours for our British Airways flight is due out at 11.30 pm. The airport toilets are a few steps away, so three of us leave Merlene to care for our things while we head in that direction. A lady attendant follows us in, hovering near with hand soap to use at the wash basin. For this service she expects some sort of gratuity. All three of us left our wallets with our hand baggage, so we have nothing to offer. Afterwards, however, Merlene takes a couple of dollar bills and presents them to the lady on behalf of all four of us. We wave, the lady smiles and everyone is happy again.

British Airways attendants conduct their own final security check and ask us to identify our checked baggage before it is loaded onto the aircraft. Once on board, I settle down for the inevitable in-flight meal and then try to get some sleep en route to London. On arrival at Gatwick airport early tomorrow morning, we will transfer by bus to Heathrow, and commence the final stage of our journey home to America. Nigeria was an amazing experience which I will not forget. Right now, though, my body longs for a hot shower, and my heart yearns for home.