

The Ivory Coast Story

by

Tom Mullenix

Introduction:

The year is 1987. Three years earlier I had taken a course entitled, “Perspectives in the World Christian Movement.” It opened my eyes to the crying need of the world for the gospel. Ever since that class, the Lord and I had a long running discussion about the need for more Restoration Movement Missionaries. The harvest was indeed plentiful and the workers few. Someone needed to recruit missionaries; someone needed to call for a greater effort to pray to the Lord of the harvest. “But, Lord,” I would often say, “I am nobody; no one knows me!”

In '87 our Lord provided the platform. Reggie Thomas invited me to join White Fields Overseas Evangelism as an associate. He established a position to fit my specific calling. Laura and I moved to Southwest Missouri on a “wing and a prayer” to begin the work. That twenty-five year partnership was blessed by God and resulted in much spiritual fruit

for Jesus' sake.

God has taught me many important lessons from my experiences in the Ivory Coast. It is my hope that this booklet will excite you about this truly special mission work and will encourage you that this can be done again and again in other places with other players – because the source of all these exciting things is our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Tom Mullenix

Chapter 1

The Best Laid Plans

In the summer of 1987, Reggie led a White Fields team to Ghana to preach the gospel in unreached villages. Just as Paul told the Corinthian Christians that he wanted to preach the gospel in “regions beyond” them, Reggie included on this trip a border crossing into the Ivory Coast. The goal: evangelize and start a Christian Church among the French speaking people of the Ivory Coast. [There were American missionaries in the capital of that country; however, they were working with Ghanaian immigrants.]

The Lord answered prayer in a marvelous way to break through a barrier of chaos that the evil one had devised, and 750 people were baptized into Christ in Ghana. Seven new village churches were planted, praise God! Then the arduous trip west to the border began. Many things went wrong, and the crossing consumed much more time, energy and money than the team expected. But they made it. The logistics, carefully planned, were in place. Christian leadership for the expected new church was available – a Ghanaian Christian who understood the same tribal language was with the White Fields team. A local translator was hired for the evangelistic meetings. A place on the public square of this regionally important city, Abengourou, was staked out. For two evenings, Reggie preached the gospel of Jesus to an assembled crowd, and offered the opportunity to commit to Christ and be baptized that night (they even brought a children's pool from America facilitate the effort). At the end of the second message, twenty seven people

responded to the invitation and were baptized that hour of the night. What a strategic victory!

And then, the best laid plans began to unravel. Their translator, who had been so effective and cooperative, sensed that his expectations would be thwarted. He was an Assemblies of God minister and he had in the back of his mind that the converts from this preaching would become part of his church ... he was mistaken, the plan had always been to launch a Restoration Movement congregation. The translator summarily quit and left the White Fields team without any cross-cultural language help, period. The Ivorians rejected the Christian leader from Ghana – we would come to understand the reasoning much later. Twenty seven believers, the makings of a new church ... and no leadership! Foiled plans, no help with the language, alone in a new country and running out of money and time; real discouragement was building up steam.

If it wasn't for Kouame, the best laid plans would surely have gone astray.

Chapter 2

God's Man

The components of a carefully constructed church launch plan came apart and were not going to fit together again. If it wasn't for Kouame ...

Kouame Adjoumani Sylvestre was an English teacher in a Catholic Secondary school in Abengourou. At this point in his life, he was seriously seeking spiritual insight and understanding, beyond what the Catholic Church offered. He had studied the Bible with the Assembly of God, but something didn't click. When Reggie preached the gospel, Kouame was on the town square just "hanging out." He heard English, a truly unique occasion in the Ivory Coast, so he went to investigate and enjoy. Because of his grasp of the language, Mr. Adjoumani actually heard the gospel sermon twice and it gripped his heart. There it was the truth from the scripture – Jesus forgives sins and he could contact that forgiveness tonight! Kouame responded to the invitation virtually immediately and was the second in line to be baptized. He was filled with joy.

The next morning, Kouame headed over to the American's hotel to speak with them and offer assistance, as a friendly gesture. He really didn't know how much of a godsend he

would be. His offer was quickly accepted and he helped the team exchange money and to pay their hotel bill. He listened carefully to the dilemma, no leadership for the new church and precious little time to find and prepare someone. “I’m no preacher, I am a teacher; but since you have no one to help, I am willing to do the best I can for this new church,” this spiritual newborn replied.

The clock was not on Reggie’s side, so he made the best of it and began to equip Kouame for the task of leading this fledgling body of believers. Kouame received two books by Don DeWalt, translated into French: The Church in the Bible and So You Want to Preach, as well as some tracts about various church practices and pertinent doctrinal topics. They would be leaving the next morning, so one last meeting was scheduled to try to cover “the high points.”

As they entered their morning meeting, Reggie started with a discussion of the Lord’s Supper; it would be of singular importance in the life of this new church. Kouame took the opportunity to tell Reggie what the Bible teaches about communion, much to his surprise! “How did you know these things?” Reggie asked. “You gave me a tract last night,” was the simple reply. Perhaps, just perhaps, God had arranged for his man to be on the town square to hear English and have his curiosity result in an opportunity to hear the New Testament gospel. Maybe God had aligned the trip and the plans to call a significant Christian leader into the ministry.

Twenty four years later, we know the answers to perhaps and maybe. Kouame has been faithful in ministry, anxious to learn the truth of Jesus and to share that truth with his fellow countrymen and foreigners alike. He is truly a man selected by God. A people-person to the extreme, Kouame has never met a stranger. His many years of teaching had resulted in a vast array of adoring students, spread all over the country. His grasp of 15 languages (you read that correctly – French, English, German and twelve African dialects, fluently!) has opened many doors for the gospel. Over 30 churches, over 3,000 believers, prison ministries... the gospel preached in other lands; God arranged that sermon opportunity in Abengourou, Ivory Coast that August evening in 1987 – no doubt about it.

Chapter 3

Checking on a baby church... Developing a lifelong friendship and partnership

For the next year, Reggie corresponded with Kouame. He was encouraged to hear that the church continued on track, yet he was desirous to see them firmly established in the

truth. A personal visit was the best way for that to happen, but Reggie's schedule would not allow it.

So, he turned to me, Tom Mullenix, and asked me to go to the Ivory Coast in August, 1988. My task was simple: check on the progress of the new church, add to Kouame's training portfolio and preach the gospel wherever possible.

Kouame and I met at the airport and spent the next two weeks together, mostly in his home in Abengourou. I learned the "rest-of-the-story" about his life and about the church. It was on this trip that I discovered the plethora of languages that he spoke and of his search for and discovery of God's truth. I also learned that most of the original believers in the new church had moved away, and Kouame had been instrumental in the conversions of most of the 80 current members.

As part of his compensation package the school had provided a house on campus, until he became effective at reaching his students through an evangelistic Bible study. At that point Kouame was confronted by the school leadership, "Either quit this Bible study or move off of campus." So, he moved off of the campus, in two phases: first, he and Julienne, his wife, and their 6 year-old son moved to the bush (jungle) for three months and lived in a lean-to. There they could save money to both rent a house and have the capital to start a restaurant. The primary investment would be a refrigerator. They located a place on the town square and erected a tarpaulin roof – behold a restaurant. The goal of this venture was to ensure that the family would have something to eat.

I spent a great deal of those first two weeks in both the restaurant and their home. Kouame kept the furnishings plain, because, "We want to invite anyone to the church that meets in our home and not be concerned if they are a thief or not." It was an incident at the restaurant that opened the door to much deeper relationship.

I had been praying since I arrived, "Lord, please show me truly what is in their hearts." The local authorities came one day and demanded an extra tax for Julienne's background music (a radio). She was quite concerned, because this tax (amounting to around \$10 American) was far more than she could pay... it might put her out of business!

I determined to give the money for the tax, but to do it anonymously. So, on a Wednesday night, right after a church prayer meeting in their home, I slid a bill (local currency) under the table cloth in the front, where I had been teaching. To my surprise, when Julienne discovered the cash and showed Kouame, they were not excited, they were dismayed. "Someone must have left this here to test us." I mentioned coyly, "Perhaps God has left the money to meet your need." They were not buying that. They wracked their brains to consider who had been there, who might have left the money. They talked about checking with some who had participated in the meeting.

The next morning, Julienne said softly to me, “You left the money there didn’t you?” I responded affirmatively. She continued, “You were the only one by the table.” “Thank you.”

The Lord had indeed answered my prayer! No doubt, their lives and characters were being molded by the Holy Spirit. Kouame has a unique perspective for a person from the developing world when it comes to the affluence of Americans. He has said often, “No matter what a person’s income is, his expenses will always rise to meet it.”

The infant church had become a “toddler” under the careful watch of a new believer and I found that I truly had family in the Ivory Coast, West Africa.

Chapter 4

Backing into an Open Door among Muslims

As Kouame and I began to develop an outreach strategy, we traveled north over a weekend to his home region. This was familiar ground where Kouame had many friends and relatives. In the major village, Asseufre, we preached the gospel on the street each night and I met and had conversations with many of the locals.

As we preached and offered the opportunity to follow Jesus in baptism (that very night), it became clear that the people there were very reluctant to rush into a commitment. They were familiar with Catholicism and were involved in spirit worship; this new teaching was going to be held at “arms length” and examined.

Plan – B came to mind; we would offer another option. The invitation to come to Christ was still on the table, but we would also offer the opportunity to study the Bible with Adjoumani. This included signing a list, moving it to the realm of a commitment. That innovation struck a chord and we had 188 over that weekend agree to study the Bible.

Something else happened in Asseufre that still boggles my mind. As you recall, Jesus said of the woman who anointed his feet for his burial (Mary, Lazarus’ sister), “Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will be told in honor of her.” I sensed the need and desire to respect Jesus’ request, so I developed a sermon asking the question, “Why would someone ‘waste’ a year’s wages on Jesus?” The reasons I submitted for Mary’s act of worship were: 1) His teaching was special (Luke 10); 2) He raised her brother from the dead (John 11); 3) she actually listened the many times Jesus’ foretold his own death and resurrection! And so Mary was the only woman who succeeded in anointing Jesus’ body for burial.

Of course, I described the Bible events when I presented my sermon that night. To my surprise, after the sermon, some Muslims came to Kouame and asked, “Does the Bible really say that? Does the Bible say someone was wrapped in cloth and buried?” (Lazarus) My partner assured them that the Bible did tell us that. Their response was, “We are the ones in this region who wrap in cloth and bury; since the Bible says that, we want to study the Bible!”

What an awesome Lord we serve! I had no idea that this was a key to the lock guarding the hearts of Muslims in the Ivory Coast. By the grace and direction of God, we backed into an open door! I tell people now, I wasn’t smart enough to think of that myself, but I’m not dumb enough to leave “wrapping with cloth” out of another sermon there! It comes rather easily as we describe Jesus’ own burial. That simple event began a steady trickle of Muslims finding salvation in our Lord in the Ivory Coast, West Africa.

The Fields are Ripe. Short Term Medical Care Helps the Harvest.

While I was there in 1988, Kouame made a suggestion; “If you could bring medical workers and offer free care to the people, it may help us in our evangelistic efforts.” Taking that to heart, I began praying about the concept; the Lord seemed to give a green light, it was time to recruit. By God’s providence, recruiting was easy. A former college roommate is a Registered Nurse; his wife, an LPN. Scott and Pam listened to my plea with deep interest. After a time of contemplation and prayer, they began preparing for a mission trip the next summer (1989).

This trip resulted in a breakthrough in response to the gospel! 239 were baptized into Christ! [Compare that to 21 on my first venture]. We took evangelistic / church planting excursions on the weekends because Kouame had to teach summer school. The Lord established a church in Asseufre on that trip. Then we went south and planted churches in two major villages. The opportunity for medical treatment drew large crowds. We offered the care, free of charge, in Jesus’ name and also prayed for each one who received care. [The five member team included my teen-age son, Dustin, and a young minister, also named Scott.]

We developed techniques and priorities on this trip that would be replicated again and again. By the grace of God, medical personnel have traveled to the Ivory Coast seven more times. American teens learned to treat wounds caused by parasites; our son, Jed, excelled at this. We even taught village Christians preventative and early treatment measures. We were able to bless many villages and even prisons with an opportunity of health and compassionate care from God’s people. A lot of the treatment was very simple, though sometimes it saved life or limb. Always, we strove to accompany it with prayer for healing and for a heart open to the gospel.

In coming years, we were invited to do an intensive work among Muslims. One of the major reasons for our welcome: when we offered medical aid, we made no difference between people – whoever was in line received help (and prayer). Acts of humble service, that met a felt need, helped to further push open this door.

God has used the talents and compassion of many faithful workers to show the love of Christ. They played a special role in The Ivory Coast Story.

Chapter 5

Passive Persecution & Relocation

We are well aware that the kingdom of God has an enemy. You can depend on Satan to attack when souls are being reached for Christ and when lives are being transformed. Kouame and Julienne Adjoumani had already sacrificed, moving off campus at the Catholic Secondary School where he taught. As you recall, he was told by School authorities, “Stop holding Bible Studies with your students, or move off campus.”

He was in a different rented house when the medical team arrived in 1989. Things grew worse over the next year. The persecution they received was very subtle, yet effective. Kouame had been placed at the bottom of the school’s payroll list. Salaries were paid based on priority order. If there was a shortage of funds, rather than prorate all salaries, they paid a reduced salary (or nothing) to those at the bottom of the list.

This became a common occurrence before our 1990 trip. Because they couldn’t pay rent, the Adjoumani’s had to move out of their house. The Muslim landlord held their furniture until they could pay back rent and, at one point, threatened to beat Kouame.

Our brother faithfully continued to teach according to his contract; and he is an excellent teacher. On our travels throughout the country, it is a common occurrence to have former students cheerfully approach him on the street to greet him. Take a moment to wear his shoes: a quality teacher who loves his students and his work, a faithful Christian worker, a husband and father of two sons – who is being “starved” out.

After much prayer, Kouame began looking for another teaching position. And, he found one... with another Catholic school in the middle of the country. So he and his family packed up and moved to Oume (pronounced Oo-may); a city of 10,000. He began teaching right away, but the financial difficulties began to surface again (he started at the bottom of the seniority list). It was here that I began working to raise a salary for Kouame from American Christians. Ultimately, the Lord provided in a wonderful way and Kouame has been free for many years to work full time for the Kingdom.

In retrospect, it is obvious that our Lord scheduled the move; both the timing and the location. Thanks to CMF missionaries, the work in Abengourou has grown much deeper and wider. And God had other plans for our ministry partnership. Oume is centrally located in the country; this location opened doors for work in more geographical locations and among more tribes. Soon it became clear; our Lord wanted us to begin planting churches in Cannibal Country.

Chapter 6

Cannibal Country

Kouame and I have preached the gospel and planted churches among six cannibal tribes in central and western Ivory Coast. American Christian workers do not have to fear cooking pots; because the purpose of these people groups is to continue the life force of their relative who just died. Also, the government has made such practice illegal; still, the news media will report incidences from time to time.

Our main experience with each of these tribes is that they are totally unaware of what Americans consider “common courtesy.” Whether it is at a baptism service, or dispensing medical treatment, we soon learned that “take a place in line, no cutting or pushing, patience and kindness” were not their normal values. Rude is the rule of the day.

One tribe, the Gagou, has as its “claim to fame” that they killed the first white man who came into their region. Working among these people is no walk in the park. And, yet, these tribes have welcomed us into their villages, listened carefully to the gospel and responded with joy to the invitation to commit their lives to Jesus. We have baptized well over 1,000 members of these cannibal tribes.

Like I said, rude is the rule of the day, until ... Jesus is welcomed into a village. Upon our return visits to a new church, we find Christians with lives transformed, and the village people are markedly different. They are calmer and more willing to wait in line for medical attention. They are generally kinder to us and one another. Their characters are different, too. Jesus changes lives and his influence changes cultures, there is no doubt about it.

Our first converts among the cannibals were the Gouro tribe in the village Doka. Kouame had developed enough relationships there for our group to go and request the opportunity to preach and provide medical treatment. On an August evening in 1991, we arrived in Doka and began the process of acquiring permission to serve there.

Permission is necessary in the villages of African tribes. Typically the chief and tribal elders will assemble and we will meet with them. After appropriate greetings, they will ask the purpose of our visit. I will then explain, through interpreters, that we have come by command of Jesus to tell them good news about how they can know the true God. We also inform them if we have medicine and nurses who have come to help. Virtually without exception, we are told, “You have come all the way from America, what you have to say must be very important.” Permission is then granted and we begin to work.

That was not our Doka experience. The elders and the chief did not assemble. We were hosted at the chief’s house, and sat on his porch while one-at-a-time a stream of elders came to us and asked the same questions. We patiently answered, although this experience was very confusing. Finally, the last (and seemingly most important) elder came for his opportunity to interview us. Once more, the answers were consistent. Then, to our dismay, he said, “Permission denied.”

We asked for reasons why, and he gave us a string of excuses and evasions. Finally, Kouame caught a drift of the real reason. He leaned over to me and said, “This is the village fetish man (their term for witch doctor). He doesn’t want any competition here, so he is denying permission.” Understanding this, I had Kouame tell the fetish man, “Ok, we will leave. But as we leave, we will do what Jesus told us to do; we will shake the dust of this village off our feet, and you will have to face God on Judgment Day.”

The witch doctor’s eyes grew to the size of saucers! He responded, “I changed my mind, you can preach.” We proclaimed the gospel of Christ that very night. We baptized twice, that night and more the next morning. In the morning, one of the converts was the village fetish woman! In total, 54 precious souls committed their lives to Jesus!

One more note of interest: the night before we went to Doka I could not sleep. So I got up and read scripture. As I was reading, I came across this passage: “But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, *because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*” (1 Corinthians 16:8, 9) Our God is an awesome God!

Chapter 7

Moving Toward Christ

In August of 1995, we arrived at the home of Kouame and Julienne after an overnight flight and a three hour drive. We immediately proceeded to sleep off our jet lag. (After Kouame’s trip to the United States in ’94, he was much more sympathetic to our travel exhaustion.) As we arrived at the house, I noticed a young man sitting on the porch; he was very quiet and reserved. We greeted him and headed to our beds.

The next morning, the young man was still seated there. We proceeded with our schedule. On the third day, we learned that he had come from a Gagou village and was there to ask us to come and evangelize his village, Boda. "Please come and tell us the message of Jesus" is not a common request; so we plotted our course to the village.

The chief and elders welcomed us with open arms. Yes, they were very interested in medical treatment; however, they were also very ready to focus on the gospel. As I began my message, thanking them for welcoming us, I mentioned their tribe, Gagou. The crowd quickly corrected me – the real name of the tribe is Bahn. (We learned later that Gagou is their 'nickname' received from the other cannibal tribes. In Gouro, it means "get lost; get out of here!")

I explained the life, purpose and gospel of Jesus as the villagers listened attentively. At the offer to come to Christ in baptism, 65 people responded affirmatively, the majority were young men. As we baptized that early afternoon, one young man came out of the water and began running around the crowd shouting in French, "My sins are forgiven!" Truly the gospel is the power of God for salvation! And now, it had reached a village of the Bahn tribe, virtually in the middle of nowhere.

Yes, there were a lot of baptisms that day, but did the commitment last? When we returned the next year, there were not 65 believers in Boda; there were 150. It was marvelous to hear their testimonies: "Formerly, this man was a drunkard and beat his wife. Now he is a Christian, his life has changed and his wife is very happy." "The thieves in this village came to Christ, and now we do not have to fear for our property." "Many people turned from fetish worship (their form of voodoo) and are no longer fearful." Truly Jesus changes lives!

We set up at the school that afternoon to provide medical attention for the people. They were very grateful; but they also lived up to the rough and rude nature of the other cannibal tribes we had come to know. The Gagou / Bahn definitely are in the top tier. We set up on the long porch of the school, and had various lines form two steps down on the ground. We had some specialty stations – one was manned by our teens – cleaning parasitic sores.

My job was crowd control. The lines were prone to become small mobs climbing up on the porch; I moved them back into a semblance of a line. Children would crowd in to see what was going on; I found effective ways to create space for my medical team. More than once, we had to stop treatment and have the nurses turn their backs on the crowd to restore order.

As we were preparing to leave, a twelve-year-old girl was brought to us. The parasitic sore on her foot had grown to nearly the size of the top of her foot and had eaten away tissue so bone was visible. We could not leave without treating her. The medical team

moved into one of the school classrooms and began to work; merely cleaning this would take a long time. Curiosity filled the villagers' minds; they wanted to take a look. I became the door-stop. With my back to the crowd, my heels locked on the threshold and my arms holding the sides of the door frame, I *literally* held them out.

The treatment took about an hour. You will be happy to know that the girl's family followed our advice carefully: keeping the area cleanly wrapped and giving her the course of antibiotics we left with them. She healed completely.

This story will help you get a sense of our experience: Half way into our treatment, a young lady on our team told me that she felt too closed in and had to get out of the classroom. Fortunately, "rude" is not in the dictionary or understanding of our host people. So, I made a quick assessment. I had another man prepared to fill the door when I moved. I had our young lady virtually at my back. Then I turned and began to push through the crowd. With each push, I said, "Excuse me" in French. Another advantage we have; Americans are larger than Bahn people. I broke through the crowd and led her to our van. When she was safely inside, I pushed my way back into the classroom. Soon we finished, packed up and prepared to leave. The people of Boda thanked us profusely for our visit. And a new church was launched that day.

After this, more Gagou villages opened their doors to the gospel. A movement toward Christ had begun.

Chapter 8

Open Doors with Muslims

Forty percent of the people in the Ivory Coast are Muslim. Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is not as resistant to Christ as in Arabic regions and Asia; but the religion has some formidable barriers to Christianity. Satan devised many landmines to prevent Muslims from considering the truth of Jesus.

For example: Mohammad taught that God would not allow the great prophet Jesus to be abused by mere men. So during the hubbub of the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, God snatched Jesus to heaven and morphed someone on the scene to look like him (many Muslims insist that man was Judas Iscariot). The stand-in for Jesus was crucified. So naturally Jesus never died nor rose from the dead; he is in heaven with God waiting to return later – to vindicate Mohammad and Islam. Muslims have also been told that the Bible has been corrupted and is not trustworthy in its current form. How can anyone reach these people for Christ?

Praise God, we are not in this struggle alone; the Lord of the universe is very active touching lives and drawing them to his Son. *“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”* [Acts 17:24-27]

Most of the Muslims in the Ivory Coast are immigrants; there are political, cultural and social problems between them and the natives of the country. The kindness of Jesus began to bring down these barriers and open doors of opportunity among them: First, Kouame studied Arabic with the local imam (Muslim holy man), building a valuable relationship – if you speak 15 languages already, another one is a breeze. Also, he could talk to these immigrants on the street because he speaks Jula (their trade language). Add to that, each year that we were in the region (since 1991) there were Muslims in line for medical treatment. Upon receiving treatment, another team member would pray for that person. We prayed not only for their healing, but that their hearts would be open to Christ and their family drawn to Jesus.

In 1996, the door flew wide open. Upon arriving in country for our two week mission, Kouame informed me that we had been invited to preach to the local Muslims and to do medical work – in the mosque! What a privilege! What pressure! I mean literally.

The appointed day arrived and our team, well prayed-up, walked there and stepped through the door. When we entered, I felt like the air around me had doubled its normal pressure. The evil one certainly was not pleased that we were on his turf to proclaim Jesus. Quietly, I instructed our team to praise the Lord, rather than focus on prayer requests. Praise is an effective spiritual weapon. In heaven God is being praised all the time. Satan and his crew are not comfortable in heaven, so worship and praise effectively push them back.

I began to preach the message of Jesus, interpreted into two languages. As I began, the pressure dissipated. I led them through some of Jesus’ great works: healing, casting out demons, sinless life and wonderful teaching. I told them the account of Jesus’ arrest, trials, death and resurrection. Then I encouraged them to pursue studying about Jesus in the New Testament. Afterward, they told Kouame Adjoumani that they now believed that Jesus died and rose from the dead.

God worked all throughout our time in the mosque. While I was preaching, my wife, Laura, was praying. She saw in her spirit a face, glowing and hovering over the mosque. No one in the room looked like that face. In the middle of my preaching, a disturbance came from the edge of the crowd, everything stopped for a moment. The head imam had just entered the room. He took his seat of prominence and then I continued with my

message. We had never seen him but Laura recognized him; because it was his face that was hovering over the mosque!

Upon finishing, we set up for medicine and treated all who came to us; wrapping up a long morning and afternoon. It was at this time we were informed of the major reason for our invitation; in years past we had treated Muslims medically when they were in line; we made no difference between them and anyone else. The kindness of Jesus had softened hearts.

This news was on the street: “The imam has allowed the Christians to present their message in the mosque. What they have to say must be true.” Once more, by God’s involvement, doors were opened for the gospel, and gradually Muslims there began to join with Kouame in Bible Study and eventually converted to Christ. I met some college students during a study the next year. These young men owned New Testaments but hid them from their parents. They would take their NT to the university, in the capital city, and study there, but when they came home for a visit they would hide it before they got to the house. I asked one young man, “When you read the New Testament, does it speak to you?” His answer was, “It speaks to me like nothing ever has!” The Word of our God is powerful and active.

Muslims continue to come to Christ, not in large groups yet, but in a small, steady stream. Our Lord deserves the glory. And we are so grateful for the opportunity to walk through an open door.

Chapter 9

Prison Ministry

This is an important thing for anyone to understand about ministry. No one does all the work or has all of the ideas themselves. In fact, God is far ahead of us, leading and setting up the ministry playing field to best advance his kingdom. Here is how our Lord started and developed prison ministries in the Ivory Coast.

Joe Garman and Barbara Barger visited Kouame to learn about his ministry and participate in evangelism. Barbara is a long time White Fields associate and was a team member on the trip in 1987 when Kouame was baptized. Joe is the Director of A.R.M. – American Rehabilitation Ministries – one of the most effective prison ministries in the United States and abroad. Naturally, Joe asked to visit a prison and there is a small one in Oume, the town where Kouame lived.

Joe and Barbara accompanied Kouame to the prison to sing & preach the gospel. After they finished, but before they left the premises, they experienced “feeding the prisoners.” Barbara related her experience to me, “It was like they were feeding animals; they threw the food on the ground and the men dove on it and struggled with one another while they wolfed the food down. They must be starving!”

Indeed, prison in the Ivory Coast is designed so that inmates do not long for a return visit – if they survive their first sentence. Weeks later, tears still filled Barbara’s eyes when she remembered the prison dinner. Determined to do something about it, Barbara raised the funds to provide a real meal for the prisoners.

The members of the Christian Church in Oume bought food, prepared it and delivered it to the prisoners. This began regular visits and a good meal a month. Romans 2:4 tells us that God’s kindness leads us to repentance. This act of kindness resonated in the hearts of hardened prisoners and they began to listen carefully to the gospel. Each August trip included a visit to the prison, and we baptized many, many prisoners – cumulatively over 100.

The gospel was bearing fruit in changed lives! Prison officials noted that Christian prisoners were easier to work with and that the whole prison culture was changing for the better. So much better that the national government contacted Kouame and requested that we begin works in other prisons. Local authorities also allowed the prisoners to plant their own garden on prison property to improve their diets.

Kouame began to consider other prison possibilities. In 1996, we visited two prisons in Bouake (about 40 miles from his current home in Yamoussoukro). These prisons were very large. One prison was designed for 400 inmates but had 800 – the prisoners had to sleep in shifts. The other had a population nearing 2,500... the food there was so poor that they allowed the prisoners to re-cook it. Prison sentences in the Ivory Coast are seldom longer than 15-20 years, even for murder; however, considering the conditions on site, few prisoners will survive the full sentence. In fact, in this large prison, several prisoners died per day.

We selected a secure area in each prison yard and our medical team treated prisoners and we prayed for them. [Kyle and Desiree Idleman were members of this mission team. Kyle preached in one prison.] The gospel of Jesus was proclaimed and we invited these men to know the One who could truly set them free. And they responded! My, how they responded! Because the baptisms had to be arranged, Kouame returned soon after we left the country and baptized over 1,000 into Christ! He would return regularly thereafter to lead in Bible Studies.

The coup d’état in 2000 effectively split the country in half. Bouake became a major location in rebel-held territory. One of the first acts of the rebels was to empty the

prisons and ARM THE PRISONERS. They scattered all over the country and there remain to this day pockets of heavily armed thieves. Sadly, we have lost contact with the Christians that were released.

Since that time, the major effort has focused on the prison in Oume. We have been invited to others, but Adjoumani's time must be prioritized and we do not yet have another African brother who can lead this work. The gospel is still very effective in prison. In 2008, Cyprien converted. He was one year into a 20 year sentence. To say he grew like a weed in Christ would actually be an understatement. His life changed so radically that he was released 17 years early for good behavior! He was teaching Bible while in prison and, upon release in 2010, he became the minister of a local church. Jesus changes lives!

Chapter 10

Self-Help: The “Goat” Program

Every time I traveled to the Ivory Coast, at least once we would have “The Conversation.” I don't blame the Ivorian people because they had seen it their entire lives. The Catholic Church did it – and due to French colonialization, Catholicism has had its foot in the door for a long time. Newcomer churches were doing the same thing: Building church buildings, schools, and even medical facilities. So I was asked, “When are you going to build a church building for us?”

Our church planting efforts had been successful beyond our wildest dreams. Within three years of the original church (1987) we had seven more established. A sure-fire trouble maker would be to build one church when you have eight. We did not have the resources available to build eight church buildings. Plus, I was not certain that we should start this burgeoning evangelistic work with the expectation that Americans would build their buildings.

“When are you going to build a church building for us?” “Other groups of Americans have built churches and schools; what are you going to do for us?” They did not like my answers. At times the temperature of these conversations grew very hot. Finally, the discussion climate would return to calm as I would explain, “I did not come here to build buildings, I came to plant the seed of the gospel of Christ in African hearts and grow an African church.”

They could appreciate the fact that jealousy was bound to happen if some churches and villages received buildings and others did not. They accepted the fact that we wanted to treat them as adults and not dependent children. And they loved that the Restoration

Movement develops locally autonomous churches. So, I survived the conversations; even though, to say the least, they were very uncomfortable.

Village churches did make attempts at their own structures with some success and some failures. It was relatively easy for village churches to receive a land donation from the local chief and to raise a cash crop on it. Church members were willing to give a day a week to plant, tend and harvest. In a cash poor society, Christians were learning to give and trust God.

Another problem was becoming clear: we were having difficulty keeping the young church leaders / preachers at a village church. In this farm society, a bad year spelled the need to move on and find another job. For the sake of church stability, something needed to change.

I have maintained a discipline (in seasons) of reading a chapter of Proverbs per day. As the new millennium turned, the end of Proverbs 27 shouted at me, "Take care of your goats and sheep!" After much prayer, and returning to the Ivory Coast for a visit, I began inquiring about the cost and maintenance of indigenous pigmy goats. The Christians were excited about the concept.

We would raise money for a herd of goats. Churches would receive a herd with which they would take care of their preacher. American believers got the vision and gave generously. We were able to begin the program immediately. Soon, our Ivorian brothers and sisters asked if they could diversify into other animals. Of course, the answer was "yes." We wanted it to be their project and for them to work in a realm where they were skilled and the market was most advantageous. Churches were involved in raising goats, sheep, pigs and chickens. One group asked about farm raising field rats – a delicacy in the Ivory Coast (think rabbit) – to my knowledge, that project never materialized. I encouraged them to practice the grace of giving with their new income.

What happened next surprised me. Three churches joined together during the Christmas season, sold animals and purchased a television and VCR. They went to nearby villages and showed the Jesus Film; and baptized 165 people who responded to their invitation! Entirely on their own, these faithful believers took the initiative. They did not ask permission; they did not request funding. They simply stepped out on faith and God provided the increase!

Preachers were able to stay, village churches were building their own buildings; and "The Conversation" was a thing of the past. Self-supporting, self-ruling, and on the verge of self-propagating; "The Goat Program" gave our Ivorian brothers and sisters the hand up they needed.

Most recently, in 2010, I invited Kouame to travel to Monrovia, Liberia to participate in

evangelistic crusades. We were willing to finance Adjoumani's travel. A local church wanted to send their preacher along. Kouame told them the Americans did not have funds to help. Their response – "Ok, we'll just sell some animals and send our preacher." So Allen accompanied Brother Adjoumani, and even preached the gospel in Liberia. "The Goat Program" was and is a real blessing in the Ivory Coast.

Chapter 11

Growing in Maturity

I have not been able to return to the Ivory Coast since 2003. The coup d'état in 2000 caused severe problems, but French & U.N. forces helped to create a safe zone in the divided country. In that time I was able to make three visits from 2001-03. Since then, political upheaval and bands of well-armed roaming thieves have made travel in country very difficult for Americans and all foreigners. Check points along the road have increased exponentially; reducing travel time to a "crawl." Even Ivorians have to be careful to stay away from danger areas.

In the wake of American leadership, the churches of the Ivory Coast have grown in maturity. It is like young people who discover that their help is needed for the family to survive and thrive... they grow up in a hurry!

Church planting was a focus of my efforts during each visit. The African Christians developed contacts in villages, but they depended on our evangelistic efforts and medical teams to make the break through. The forced isolation, brought about by the coup, caused a change in strategy; our brothers and sisters in the Ivory Coast began taking it upon themselves to look to the next village, evangelize and plant a church.

They took their new-found resources, from the goat program, and used some of them to build church buildings. Local construction: including thatched roofs (with heavy mill plastic underneath), clay bricks and native plaster and local labor. Churches are self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Due to the perseverance and consistency of Kouame Adjoumani, the idea of locally autonomous churches, and restoring the church established by Jesus in the New Testament is intriguing Ivorians of all stripes in quality ways.

Kouame even presented me with an opportunity for micro-loans. Several prostitutes had come to Christ in a cluster of villages. They were giving up their only means of making a living. The churches quickly devised a plan: if these women could be given enough money to start a business (African style fast-food or sewing) – they could make an honest living, be free from their past and more effectively grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord Jesus.

They requested funding for approximately twenty micro-loans. The next step was thoroughly African, with our hearty approval; the women would repay their loans to the church, a little from each day's profits, and that cash would be used to buy metal roofing for the church buildings. Truly our Lord is leading his church to maturity. It is so gratifying to partner with our African brothers and sisters as they grow in Christ.

Political Turmoil and Church Growth

In the most recent years, the political climate in the Ivory Coast became severely unstable; leading to military action and a period of chaos. At one point, Kouame had to travel out of the country (north to Burkina Faso) so that he could receive emergency funding from America. His wife, Julienne, had experienced a stroke and was basically bedfast. Herve & Clemont (their adult sons) stayed in their compound to care for her. Local believers brought vegetables and other produce she needed for her diet. Praise the Lord, Kouame was able to receive the money, by divine appointment reconnect with doctors and care for her with dignity through the crisis and then to the day of her death (September 14, 2011).

When troops invaded the economic capital, Abidjan (population – 4 million), and people scattered, Kouame was able to care for many Christians, of different groups, in their home. Due to the generosity of American believers, Kouame was able to use his newly acquired car to minister to others when public transportation ground to a halt.

The Christians of the Ivory Coast stayed faithful to our God and practically loved each other throughout the tumultuous time. Political stability has now returned to the country. The armed bandits are still roaming, but locals know where to avoid!

Kouame remains active in ministry: planting churches, training leadership, and developing such a level of rapport with denominational preachers that they asked him to council all new pastors in their region!

I am grateful for the strong, strong roots that are nourishing Christ's church in the Ivory Coast. The mustard seed that was planted in 1987 and watered throughout these 25 years has grown into a cluster of churches, living, loving and reaching out to the glory of God!

Conclusion

The Ivory Coast story is inspiring because it is a reminder of the power of God and his activity for the sake of the gospel. It also brings front-and-center the real value of partnership between American Christians and native believers.

I have contacts in other countries and other unreached or less-reached areas; and I continue to pray for and seek more partners. I am actively searching for partners who will accept the responsibility of working with an international Christian leader to spread the gospel and start church planting movements. My personal experience says regular short-term trips (one a year in this case) can be very effective.

I cannot promise an evangelist with the various skills and talents of Kouame. But I know that our God is actively involved in advancing his kingdom. When you and I join him in that effort, he will make all the difference in the world.

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PAGE * MERGEFORMAT 3