Rosedale Bible College students will study world missions and the African church with Kenyan teachers and students during RBC’s inaugural Kenya cross-cultural term next winter, December 31–February 14. And they’ll be able to do it at very little extra cost, thanks to a new cross-cultural grant program sponsored by the college.

Commenting on the origin of the grant program, President Dan Ziegler said, “During this past decade RBC’s international study experiences have played an increasingly important role in preparing our students to understand and engage the world around them for the cause of Christ.”

But international study can be expensive. The grant program, said Ziegler, “ensures that each of our students pursuing an associate degree will have the opportunity to round out their RBC education with an international learning experience.”

The program provides up to $2000 for each second-year student participating in one of RBC’s international study opportunities. The grant is designed to cover most of the extra costs related to international study (air fare, on-site travel, etc.), thus enabling our students to take part in these world-wide learning experiences for close to the same cost as staying on campus.

In addition to this year’s Kenya Term, tentative plans are in place for a six-week Spain Term and a three-week European Study Tour during the following year (2011-2012). “This grant program represents a major institutional commitment to fostering our vision for advancing an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith,” said Ziegler.

Leading the Kenya term is Abraham Ndungu, who recently immigrated to the United States with his wife, Naomy, and their three children. Prior to coming to central Ohio, Abraham taught in the environmental planning and management department at Kenyatta University near Nairobi. He was also a pastor in the Hunter’s Community Mennonite Church in Nairobi and a dean and teacher at Regions Beyond Ministry Bible College, where the classroom component of the Kenya Term will take place.

Abraham taught Current Issues in Missions at RBC as adjunct faculty during this year’s winter term and will teach courses next year as well. He said the six-week Kenya Term “will give RBC students an opportunity to experience African culture and to get to know what makes the African church unique.”

The program is designed to provide “a lot of interaction with the Kenyan church,” he said. On weekends, students will visit in Christian homes, worship in churches in Nairobi, Meru, Ukambani and Thika, and tour Mombasa and Malindi on the Kenyan coast.

“It is good for Mennonites to go and see their fellow Anabaptists and have time to get to know their practices and their ways of life,” said Abraham. Students will also visit other denominations and “explore broader Kenyan culture.”
The academic component of the term consists of two three-credit courses: Introduction to World Missions, and African Church in the Twenty-First Century. Classes will be team taught by the director of Regions Beyond Ministry (RBM) Philip Mbatia, Abraham, and other RBM faculty. Kenyan students will be involved in the class on the African church and in the daily chapels.

About Regions Beyond Ministry Bible College

Regions Beyond Ministry describes itself as “an interdenominational, non-political and non-profit making faith organization with a vision of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.” RBM traces its roots to the spiritual awakening in Kenya in the 1970s, and Philip Mbatia and his wife, Catherine Waweru, have served with the organization for decades. Philip resigned his teaching post to become director in the early nineties and is also the principal of RBM’s Bible College.

RBM’s vision is to equip leaders and lay people to build up God’s Kingdom. They do this through the Bible College and missions to schools, colleges and universities; they also conduct outreaches, seminars and retreats.

Located about 40 kilometers east of Thika Town, RBM’s school/retreat center is nestled in a beautiful valley along the Athi River. People come to the campus from Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia to learn more about God’s word and how to lead effectively. People have even come from Rosedale Bible College!

RBH and RBC

In 1982, Willard Mayer traveled to Kenya to be the first in a long line of faculty members who have had the privilege of teaching at RBM Bible College’s December session. Abraham Ndungu sees the Kenya term as a way “to cement the relationship that has been there over the years between RBC and RBM.”

He is also eager to help our students see what is happening in an area that is experiencing great church growth. “We are looking at the challenges and prospects of the African church in the 21st century,” he said. “Although African Christians are grateful for the growth of the church, many leaders are not well trained. “The growth in numbers comes with the challenge of grounding these people in the faith.”

The church in Kenya is also challenged by external forces, he said, such as influence from Islam. His diocese is located in a majority Muslim area. “You have to be very careful how you present the gospel,” he explained.

Syncretism poses another challenge to the church. People who have grown up with their own African beliefs and customs are influenced by Christianity. “Only God knows who is really converted,” he said, but when people practice African beliefs and religions alongside their Christian faith, it is not always clear whether they’re more into believing the God of the Bible or the African traditions.

Untrained leaders find it hard to discern and help these young Christians, he explained. In addition, in some places “Africans are very resistant to Western ways.” But in wanting to develop an African expression of faith, they sometimes “throw away the baby with the bath water.”

Philip Mbatia and Catherine Waweru have served with Regions Beyond Ministry for decades. Speaking at the graduation banquet in 2006, one student expressed his appreciation for their ministry this way: “You cannot teach spiritual warfare if you don’t know the truth...and are not being told how to walk with the Lord...When the church lacks vision, it will be seen in the land. Brother Philip, God bless you for setting up this school.”

RBM Bible College’s setting is lush, with bell-shaped pink tropical flowers dangling from branches overhead and tiny teal birds hopping around in the dust. Weaver birds work on their nests, which hang suspended from trees in the river, while goats munch grass in the neighboring fields, and lizards scurry across the rooftops of the campus buildings.

The whole question of blending Christianity and African traditions is complex, because some traditional practices can be identified with biblical practices. For example, said Abraham, “seers” will give a word of wisdom or a word of knowledge. This sounds biblical, but often the person doing this has a lifestyle that raises questions regarding their faith. The same can be true of people who practice healing.
Students who participate in the Kenya term will also see how churches deal with poverty in their midst. “After church services, here are Christians whose kids have not had any breakfast,” said Abraham. “You’re preaching and you tell them, ‘God loves you and he’s a provider.’ You can’t just send them home. If you have something, you must give, and of course you have to be careful not to make them feel like they’ve come there to get food.”

Abraham’s hope is that our students will come away from Kenya with a better understanding of “the cultural, political, and religious state of the dimensions that are shaping or have shaped the African church.” And RBC’s hope is that they will use that knowledge to further build the Kingdom.

Wondering...why look back?

by Max Zook

Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” Luke 9:62

Rule number one for plowing a straight furrow is to keep your eyes fixed straight ahead on some object and go straight towards it without looking around. Plowing demands a future look.

Why even think about the past? We can’t change it. We are who we are because of choices we and others made in the past. If we look back we will only be confused about where we are going.

So why have centennials and anniversaries and birthdays? Why write history books and historical dramas and entertain historical reflections? Why listen to the old stories over and over again?

Because our faith is a faith rooted in the facts of what God did in history, which is really “his story.” Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” The Word of God is His divinely inspired record of what He did in His story. Our faith is built and inspired by stories of the past. Jesus certainly never advocated an ignorance of His Word.

My son has spent several months in an African culture that is rapidly losing its rootedness because life expectancy has been reduced to 40-and-under due to serious health care problems, not the least of which is the AIDS crisis. In that setting there are precious few older people to tell the stories of the past, to shape cultural identity, and to inspire faith through a historical perspective.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) said, “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.”

So what was Jesus condemning by his allusion to plowing? Was it the same thing the angel meant when he told Lot and his family not to look back at their burning home and city? When Lot’s wife looked back she turned into a pillar of salt. Many years ago a woman in our church reported that she looked back while driving a car and turned into a fence post … with damaging results!

It seems to me that the looking back that is condemned in scripture is a kind of backward look that includes attachment, covetousness, even idolization. One cannot serve Jesus wholeheartedly while remaining attached to the values or symbols of the prior life. True followers of Jesus carry no idols nor do they worship past ideals, customs, or accomplishments.

But true followers of Jesus have their faith planted firmly in the character of God as revealed in His story. They are humble enough to learn from the failures and successes of people in the past. And they know who they are and from where they have come.

But they live freely and lightly. They love nothing but God and hate nothing but sin. They have nothing to lose, nothing to hide, and nothing to prove, even while learning from the past.

Max Zook is the senior pastor at Locust Grove Mennonite Church in Belleville, Pennsylvania.