Last winter, Twila and I spent four amazing weeks on the shores of Lake Victoria’s Mara Bay among the Mennonites in a little place called Nyabange, not far from Musoma town. Nyabange gets its name from Nyabange Hill, a somewhat surprising pile of rocks rising maybe a hundred feet immediately behind the house we lived in. Several boulders in the backyard had apparently once been part of the hill, so we were glad things had stabilized. Nyabange is also home to the Mennonite Theological College of East Africa. MTCEA was the reason we were in Africa, the place where I taught two courses, and the context for most of our relationships in Tanzania.

Our alarm went off at 6:00 most mornings, since it took some time to heat water on the stove for our splash baths, but even before then sometimes the sounds of early morning prayers in the chapel would waft up the gentle slope in the pre-dawn stillness. We could count on early morning prayers in the chapel would waft up the mountain and into our home, and inquiries about our health and the night’s rest. If Twila happened not to come, the staff were sure to ask, “And how is Mama this morning?”

Morning classes, and most other classes, started with a selection of songs from the Tenzi za Rohoni (“Songs of the Spirit”). Our friends loved the Tenzi, carried well-worn copies along with their Bibles, and sang with full voice and much joy. The phonetic spelling and sweet cadence of Swahili drew us into singing along even though we didn’t know exactly what we were singing most of the time.

Ten o’clock was the time for the entire college to gather for chai and chapatis. The atmosphere was convivial, and conversation flowed easily – from serious theological discussion to good-natured banter. Several colleagues wanted to impress me with the importance of paying bride-price, pointing to examples in the Old Testament as a biblical basis for continuing the practice today. This reminded me of how my father-in-law had come back from Kenya years ago, complaining that I had gotten his daughter too cheaply, and that he wanted some cows! He was only joking, but after hearing the complaint a few times around a dinner table wanted some cows! He was only joking, but after hearing the complaint a few times around a dinner table asking, “Did you eat it?”

Chapels followed chai time, and commonly featured student reports of “Field Experience” – a requirement for every student at MTCEA. They were given very little money and sent to various places around Tanzania and Kenya with the expectation that they would do visitation and teaching to assist local churches in the area. Some had it easy, but others did pioneering evangelism to tribal groups where the customs were very different from their own, walking miles per day in unfamiliar territory, knocking on doors where their welcome was far from certain. Impressive dedication to the task of evangelism was a consistent aspect of these field experiences.

The cross-cultural aspects of mission also received attention. For example, the issue of being served rat meat came up several times in the reports, and was always a point of fascination for the student body. Someone was bound to laughingly ask, their question full of distaste, “Did you eat it?”

Rat was never on the menu, but we did experience wonderful hospitality in the homes of faculty colleagues, college staff, and local church members. Even people in the area who were friends of our friends in the U.S. would invite us to their homes. Their warm greetings are still ringing in our ears.

Rich, milky chai, fresh chapatis, and relaxed conversation every morning at ten – for the entire school. Why doesn’t RBC do this?!
Fred Okello was acting academic dean while his wife, Carren, was on maternity leave. He was a good supporter, Twila was grateful for Carren’s very good English skills.

trust and solidarity, the lady of the house might say, “Thank you for looking after my restaurant.” When it was time to walk home in the warm evening darkness, we were usually accompanied to within sight of our door by our host, and sometimes by the entire household!

So much to like and enjoy! But the unfamiliar environment brought challenges as well. Teaching to students whose grasp of English was tenuous meant that I had to speak slowly, and to wonder frequently if I was really communicating. Sometimes the smiles of comprehension did not come before considerable Swahili-English discussion among the students. Teaching from Acts 15 to a pair of Maasai tribesmen brought questions I’ve never entertained at RBC. “We drink blood, and sometimes (with a gesture simulating pinching a cow’s nostrils) we suffocate our cattle. Should we stop doing that?”

Pulled on one side, pushed on the other. We are still spinning from our brief pilgrimage in Nyabange. I would give a lot if I believed it would chart a more hopeful [prosperous?] course for the people we came to joy to be a part of whatever that is. A lot of joy.

From before sunrise to after sundown, a steady trickle of people who without hesitation asked us to buy them cars, pay for their children’s college, or fund their education in the U.S. My first reaction was to walk home in the warm evening darkness, we were usually accompanied to within sight of our door by our host, and sometimes by the entire household!

The longing for a safe place keeps providing a healing environment to work toward growing a safe place within your team. Do what it takes to work toward making your leadership team a safe place – don’t give up – your ministry depends on it!

A safe place keeps providing a healing environment in times of hurt.

Let me be very clear first of all that Jesus is my refuge, my safe place in times of hurt. I have experienced a tremendous feeling of security the day I became assured my fellow elders loved me and had my good in mind. I could trust them with my hurt and I knew they would walk with me according to how they felt I would be helped the most. If one does not feel safe it is impossible to receive much that is helpful.

What makes a place safe?

I feel safe with elders who have a track record of handling my personal stuff and leadership issues with the greater good of the kingdom in mind. I don’t want them to only think of me alone, because the cause is much greater than me. I feel safe when confronted because I know I am loved and they will not harm me in the process. This position of trust has been earned by years of walking together in transparency, support, and respect. If one does not feel safe in your leadership team it means that you go outside of your team to look for that safe place. This makes dealing with hurts more difficult to resolve and brings a strain to the leadership team. Going outside your leadership team to look for a safe place can be helpful only if it results in equipping you to work toward growing a safe place within your team. Do what it takes to work toward making your leadership team a safe place – don’t give up – your ministry depends on it!

A safe place keeps providing a healing environment in times of hurt.

Find a safe place to process your wounds.

This has risen to number one of importance in my journey. It is great when this safe place can be your fellow ministers and elders and it is tragic when it is not. I remember experiencing a tremendous feeling of security the day I became assured my fellow elders loved me and had my good in mind. I could trust them with my hurt and I knew they would walk with me according to how they felt I would be helped the most. If one does not feel safe it is impossible to receive much that is helpful.

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I can identify a few big-time hurts spanning my experience of forty years as senior pastor in the same church. I was sure that awful things were being done to me at the time and I was being wronged unfairly. There were a few tough times in which I cried out to God all night long because I was not sure I could go on. I am aware that even though I can look back and have an insightful discussion today about those wounds, it is not clear to me how much I was wronged or that someone had actually sinned against me. I am mostly aware that I have benefitted so much in my journey from the wounds I experienced that it doesn’t seem necessary for me to know that answer for sure. What I am aware of is that most of my wounds in ministry came from my own character deficiencies and sinful responses. Today as I walk with some of my pastor friends in their wounds it prompts me to review my journey. This is not an easy journey, but one that no price tag can touch. Most of us hear God and experience lessons in leadership in our time of pain that is not taught any other place.

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A safe place keeps providing a healing environment in times of hurt.

Let me be very clear first of all that Jesus is my refuge, my safe place in times of hurt. I have experienced brothers and sisters who have become an extension of that safety as they follow Christ. It is not wise for leaders to go around the church collecting sympathy when you are hurting. As I wind up this discussion I am aware that I am on a team that I love very much. Each one of them could sit down with you and discuss my character weaknesses and times when these weaknesses have resulted in me struggling with sin. It is so healing to know that I have a safe place in spite of their knowledge of the good and the sinful in me. I am assured that they will respond by having my good in mind. I honestly don’t know what I would do if all the doors would close in my attempt to make the leadership team a safe place for me to be real – at least it gives me empathy with those leaders who make the painful decision that it is not going to happen and feel they need to move on.

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