

Andrew and Rosemary Symonds
P.O. Box 2324, Mbabane, Swaziland
Email: ajsymonds@posix.co.sz Tel.00268 4161874

At last – news from Swaziland! We are so thankful for all your love, prayers and support for us and are sorry not to have written before. However it gives us the opportunity to say how much we wish you a very blessed and joyful Christmas.

It has been a tough few months in many ways, although we know most of us experience difficulties of many varieties. Our main problem is that we are far from home, family and friends and live and work in a culture with very different values which is very much reflected in the life of the church. We have also been facing the difficult decision as to whether we should stay in Swaziland, move to another USPG assignment or come home to work in England. After much prayer we felt that we should stay for another year to continue trying to get the Life Skills Programme and the Sunday School teaching material into all parishes. Apart from continuing the general training work we are also needed for the Farm Project if it should go ahead. We are pleased to be able to say that we have just had confirmation from USPG that they will support us in Swaziland for a further year so that we should be here until February 2011. At the same time we have been facing practical difficulties as our wonderful little RAV 4 has now done 225,000 kilometres, has been costing us a fortune in repairs and we are very thankful each time we return home after being out in it! Our house has been requisitioned by the government for a Toll Gate and we have no idea when we will have to move or where we will go although we are assured by Bishop Meshack that we will have somewhere to live. However we naturally hope that it will have a good supply of water and electricity, will give us some privacy and will not be too noisy!

Young People

Since we came back from England in January Andrew had been trying to get the Sunday School Coordinator to get the Sunday School teachers together for a training weekend to launch the material very kindly given by Chelmsford Cathedral. This finally happened at the end of September. Andrew was really encouraged as a good group of keen teachers met together for a weekend and Andrew led interactive sessions on Child Development and Spirituality and then gave a demonstration of a lesson with the new material. Things that are so 'normal' to us when working with children are all very revolutionary in Swaziland! The material for the next year has just been photocopied for over 100 Sunday Schools! We really pray that this material will encourage the teachers and make a difference in the lives of the children.

For over a year Andrew had been trying to get the Youth Convenor to get Youth Leaders together for a conference to think about the needs of the young people. This actually happened a week after the Sunday School weekend! They looked at the way youth work has been running and together came up with many suggestions as to how programmes and work could change for the better. We pray that something will happen.

Andrew is still trying to get the Life Skills Programme to happen in the parishes and whilst it is being promoted at every opportunity and being enthusiastically received by all priests and Youth Leaders, it is still not actually happening! It had been agreed that it would happen in the Christmas Summer holidays which start this week, so Andrew will be making lots of phone calls to try to make it a reality at least in some parishes! Good news, recently, at the Cathedral PCC meeting the Provost and Wardens agreed that they would take personal responsibility for ensuring that at the Cathedral and the many outstation congregations the programme would take place.

TRAINING

Since we last wrote, training has been going on as normal at parish and archdeaconry levels. The September School Holiday programme studied the subject of evil and the church's response. This subject was chosen because of the many extraneous ideas about evil and demon possession that derive from traditional religion and the surrounding Zionist Churches - as well as the need for us to take into ourselves the suffering of the world as Christ's body.

The Introductory Certificate Course continues and Andrew has had the joy of leading a group from the church next to our house as well as helping in other parishes. The enthusiasm continues and reached a climax at the Diocesan family Day when 50 certificates were presented to those who have successfully completed the course by the first wife of the King who attended our service.

From those who have completed the Certificate Course six people have requested additional study in order that they may be considered for ordination. Working with them has been a joy as they bring back a vitality and joy to what sometimes becomes tedious and routine.

At the beginning of December Andrew led the clergy retreat, which should have been led by the Bishop of Iowa. The retreat not only provides a period of rest and refreshment but also a change of routine and environment particularly as it is a silent retreat. Silence is certainly not a Swazi habit and clergy find the retreat a struggle. In order to provide relief Andrew introduced periods when clergy pastor each other. This went down unexpectedly well and provided the opportunity for clergy to speak about the burdens they feel they should never mention as well as the opportunity to break the silence.

Schools

January 2010 sees the beginning of free education for children which will allow many children who do not yet go to school the opportunity for education. You would think that we would be rejoicing at this long awaited development, but because of shortage of money the government is introducing free education for Grades 1 and 2 only but without any age limit so that people even in their twenties are hoping for education. The sting in the tail is that the government will provide money for students well below the fees parents have been paying and any such money will not be available to the schools until well into the academic year. Obviously, once 'free' education is available schools cannot and will not be permitted to charge parents in order to make up the shortfall arising from fulfilment of the common dream of all people.

Dilemmas such as how to introduce free education to comply with constitutional requirements and to satisfy international pressure must be common for many developing countries and shows how the world must work together to uplift the poor.

As a church we are responsible for a large number of schools and face a challenge that seems irresolvable. I was recently leading a week's study course that included a number of teachers and headmasters and the discussion at breaks revolved around the problems they were facing. One head explained that from January he would have two classes of seventy pupils instead of the usual forty. Although the government has promised additional teachers by utilising existing teachers who currently teach below the expected number of hours, the head explained that he had no accommodation so as to divide the classes. He was planning to get a number of planks to set across concrete blocks to provide additional seating and groaned at the problem he faced after Christmas! He had no idea how he could keep additional staff such as night watchmen and the school secretary as he would have no means to pay their salaries.

Fortunately, teachers are paid by the government but the fees that previously were received from parents have to cover the cost of additional staff, utilities, buildings, books and materials etc. We wait with baited breath wondering what will happen to education in our schools.

Children, mothers and grandmothers

The church has recently received a promise of money for a new pilot project. We shall be introducing this programme in three parishes to measure the effectiveness of working with grandmothers and mothers to help them train their children in basic skills and behaviour. In a way there is nothing new about this approach because Africa has long had a tradition of grandmothers teaching girls about life. Sadly, however, the spread of HIV and AIDS has so disrupted family life, with orphaned children being moved from family to family something of the tradition has been lost. We hope that by working with those caring for children we can revitalise the tradition so that children grow up with true and lasting values that will lead to full lives.

Andrew is currently, working on a new Life Skills programme in conjunction with the Diocesan HIV and AIDS office. They have received money to produce a Bible based programme for teenagers to teach skills for life. Initially, the programme will run for 50 weeks so that it gives the opportunity of dealing with a wide range of subjects. Although the task is daunting, Andrew is quite excited as he bemoans the fact that children have no concept of conserving resources such as water, no awareness of the beauty of creation around them, as well as the mundane subjects of health, wellbeing etc etc.

The new programme will run alongside the existing Life Skills Programme that deals specifically with relationships and sexual behaviour and can be used to reach a wider range of teenagers beyond the borders of the church.

USPG Ireland and the Farm Project

We were very excited to have Jan and Linda from USPG Ireland come to spend two weeks in Swaziland to see more of the work of the church here and research in order to put together their application for funding for the Farm Project. Ken Gibson, a member of their board, also came as he has a lot of experience in these funding applications. We have been involved in a lot of work to get as far as we have with the project and hope that it will actually happen as it will bring employment for about 200 people, provide training in agriculture for many but particularly will generate income for working amongst those who are most in need so that the Diocese can become self-sufficient. USPG Ireland has also managed to get two vehicles for Swaziland, one for us, to replace our dying RAV, and one for the Farm, but it is a nightmare trying to find out about how to apply for Tax Exemption on importing them as the duty is 37% and to get the necessary documentation for an application. It was a wonderful encouragement to us to have Jan, Linda and Ken here with us.

The Weather

Like many of you we have been having a tremendous amount of rain but ours has been for about three months. It is a great blessing to have as we are in such need of it for filling reservoirs, softening the ground for planting crops and for making the grass grow for the cattle. The countryside looks so beautiful in fresh Spring green everywhere. Sadly it has brought a lot of hardship as many cook outside on wood fires so have been unable to cook their staple 'meallie' and have hot food. Children walk miles to school without shoes or umbrellas and sit through school being very wet and last weekend many bridges were washed away so that children could not get to school to take their end of year exams. People have to walk to work and just to be out for a minute gets you soaked through. As usual it is the disadvantaged families who suffer most. Those of us with cars do not have to get too wet and the full reservoirs means we have water coming out of our taps. (hopefully!) We are not used to cloud for so long here and most of us are very miserable and longing for blue skies! But we are so thankful for the full reservoirs and the beauty.

Work Load

Apart from all the training and other additional duties given to Andrew to administer/organise, the Board of the Thokoza Church Conference Centre 'gave' him the responsibility of overseeing the construction of a new

conference facility on behalf of the Board. This has meant that we have not really had a day off for several months, so you may be able to imagine a little of how we feel!

Ants, Ants, Ants!

We are in the season of ants – ants of so many different varieties, sizes and colours. There are not as many as in Bangladesh but there are still millions! They march in armies around the kitchen work surfaces which creates havoc when preparing food, especially when making pastry. I have to wipe them away until they stop coming for a minute, make and roll out the pastry very quickly before the next invasion arrives. It gives me a good excuse for not producing top quality pastry!

Cultural differences!

We suffer from a great deal of noise around our house from the church, preschool and orphans feeding station next to us but the other day there was some additional 'disturbance'. A church member had washed his car seats and was, with great noise, taking them out of his car and depositing them to dry in the sun on a slim border of concrete outside our bedroom/study window. After exchanging the usual polite Swazi greetings I suggested he move them!

Thank you again for all your love, prayer and practical support for us – we need it!

With our love and prayers

Rosemary and Andrew

Please pray for:

Swaziland as corruption and injustice is increasing causing suffering to the most vulnerable

Clergy will be motivated and empowered to implement the Life Skills training

A suitable new home for us and strength to carry on

Funding for the Farm Project.

Full recovery for Bishop Meshack after a hip replacement operation