

How a Four-Day Bus Ride Changed My World

Last month God used a poor pastor from Malawi to challenge my suburban American priorities.

When I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, last month to conduct a women's conference, my host, a journalist named Gideon, mentioned that my "pastor friend from Malawi" was waiting to see me. I was surprised to hear this, since I wasn't aware that I had a pastor friend from Malawi. I've never been to that country and I didn't remember talking to anyone from there.

"He says you've been e-mailing each other," Gideon said. "And he arrived today to see you."

"I think we should let reality sink in. So much of the world today is struggling while we Americans—even in an economic recession—are living at a level of unimaginable abundance."

Then I vaguely remembered receiving a message a few months earlier from a man from somewhere in southern Africa. He asked if I would come to his country to speak at a women's conference, and I told him that I can't do events like that with people until I have met them and established a relationship of trust.

In a few hours I met this man, Pastor Peacepound. After a few minutes of small talk I learned that he had traveled on a crowded bus from Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, to Nairobi. It was a four-day journey.

Four days on a bus? I was stunned. I've never met anyone in the United States who has traveled that long to attend a Christian meeting. We simply aren't that spiritually desperate. But this guy was so concerned about the way women are abused in his country—through domestic violence, molestation and mutilation—that he made an astonishing sacrifice.

Then he stunned me again with a question. "You said you could not come to Malawi unless we met. Now that we have met, will you come?"

What was I supposed to say? I almost laughed out loud as I imagined a possible response. "Well, pastor, I'll have to pray about that," just didn't seem appropriate. How could I deny this man's petition when he had paid such an incredible price? What was there to pray about?

This pastor's request reminded me of the apostle Paul's vision of a Macedonian man who said to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9, NASB). Pastor Peacepound's appeal was as sincere as it was humbling. Before the afternoon was over I had committed myself to coming to Lilongwe. It was the least I could do in light of this man's faith and tenacity.

I'll have to make a few sacrifices to go to Malawi next year. I don't enjoy being away from my family that long. But when I consider the fact that my plane ride from Florida to Africa will take less time than Pastor Peacepound's famous bus ride, it puts things into perspective.

In my recent travels in the developing world I have met so many precious men and women like Pastor Peacepound. They know little of our Western comforts. They've never seen granite countertops, flat-screen TVs, iPods or GPS systems. They can't imagine needing garage door openers, leaf blowers, security systems or the other suburban niceties we think are so crucial. The concept of gated communities or home theaters is

an unthinkable concept to them.

These people live in poor countries where many people don't even have access to clean water or reliable electricity. They are just thankful to have enough rice and beans on the table. (Meanwhile some of us are obsessing about whether our gourmet vegetables are organic.)

As I have built friendships with Christian leaders in the developing world, God has totally messed with my suburban values:

- My friend Raja, who rescues throwaway baby girls from trash cans in southeastern India, runs an orphanage for dozens of kids yet lives on a miniscule salary.
- Lydia, a Christian lady I met in Kenya, runs a charitable school in Nairobi's largest slum and cares for numerous special-needs children—even though the school cannot cover her own living expenses.
- Oto, a pastor I work with in Guatemala, feeds more than 100 needy children every day—but he has no health insurance or retirement plan and he has never been able to afford a vacation.

It's uncomfortable to think about these jarring disparities, but I think we should let reality sink in. So much of the world today is struggling while we Americans—even in an economic recession—are living at a level of unimaginable abundance

I pray we will hear and answer the Macedonian cry coming from so many parts of the world. I pray we will act. I pray that someday soon you will meet your own version of Pastor Peacepound, and that you will begin to view the world through his eyes.

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