

13 April 2002
Fajara, The Gambia

Hello from western Africa! I am very much alive and well, though email access has been a little scarce for the last several weeks. But when the electricity is on, I can write my newsletter, and so here I am.

We flew from London to Banjul last Tuesday and immediately started finding our way around. Our schedule started in earnest this week, and the group is now split into three teams during the daytime. The first is working with several operational departments on the Anastasis, the second is actually helping with various tasks in the ship's medical wards, and the third spends each day working with orphans and in area hospitals. We rotate every two weeks, and the first week is already almost done. Right now my team is on the ship and I'm filling in as the storesman—I personally supply the food to the galley for the four hundred people who eat three meals every day. I have no problems with boredom, generally speaking.

We're living in two small houses here outside of Banjul, about twenty minutes from the Anastasis. The women took over the house that the ship's advance team had been renting, which has hot water (!) and is where we eat dinner as a group each night. The twelve of them pretty much fill the two bedrooms there, so we guys are staying about two miles up the road with a YWAM family from India that has been here several years.

The culture here is even more foreign to me than I had expected, and yet I'm still surprised by how familiar it seems in some ways. If I greet someone in Wolof (a common tribal language), their whole face lights up, yet English is the official language, and most people are fluent. The country is around 95 percent Muslim, but although I'm woken every morning by the mosque loudspeakers calling everyone to prayer, the vast majority of people in the area seem to practice Islam nominally if at all. The markets are exactly what you'd expect to find in the average African country (colorful and cheerful chaos smelling mainly of fish and urine), but there's an internet café down the street.

It's confusing yet strangely peaceful, dirty and lovely all at once. The cliché about a “land of contrasts” is, in a word, true. None of my travels to this point have landed me anywhere I've felt more out of place. We don't see much in the way of extreme poverty or need in this part of the country, but every time I walk down the street to the market I am struck again by a hundred different things that remind me the nearest “Western” country is over a thousand miles away. I'm taking plenty of pictures, when it doesn't violate local etiquette, and my stories to tell are already piling up. But with the logistics here, I can't easily get at my email more than about once a week, so I'm afraid most of it will have to wait till I get back. In the meantime, I should be able to keep on sending these updates, at least, and considering where I am, I'm pretty glad just to be able to do that.

If you'd like to ask God for some things for me while I'm out here (cuz I would sure like that), I'd have to say health and safety for everyone in the group are right up there. We're on antimalarials, for instance, but they're not a sure thing, and we all get bitten by mosquitoes every day. Also, we live in a safe area, but naturally a house full of twelve white women doesn't exactly fit into a small community like this. Then, too, pray for us to find firm and friendly connections with the local people we see every day. This is a highly relational culture, where even asking someone for directions is rude unless you first greet them and—however superficially—inquire as to their health. I now know how to say hello in several different tribal languages, and something as small as that can open some amazing doors. Here, relationship can change everything. Sam, our YWAM host, has been here for years without seeing much in the way of results for his long labor. Yet he told us a story that illustrated the power of plain old kindness. He'd once noticed that the local well was very muddy, making it difficult and unhealthy for the women to gather water. He got a few of his friends together one afternoon and mixed some cement for a flooring slab to aid them. The man next door, who happened to be the local imam, was so impressed and moved by this that he invited Sam to speak at a service in the mosque, and he did. Suddenly a bleak situation was transformed by a simple act of service, one that might have gone unnoticed somewhere else.

So we're doing all we can in that regard. Not because it opens doors, but just because. I met a guy last week who showed me the inside of his mouth, where a dentist from the Anastasis had removed some

broken teeth that were infected and hurting him badly, the last time the ship was here. So a difference is being made. It may seem pretty insignificant to me. Really, sometimes it doesn't even seem to matter at all to anyone. But whether I'm spending my time hauling sacks of flour, or laminating teaching aids for the community health teams, or playing with toddlers in a pediatric ward, it helps me to try to remember that the difference—however tiny, and whether I can see it or not—is very real. It's for that reason and many others that I am exploring options for signing on with one of the ships, possibly the Caribbean Mercy again, after my DTS has ended. I will keep you posted on that as soon as I find out where I'll be after I visit Chicago and Milwaukee in June!

Hopefully this newsletter will reach everyone it was intended to, without the problems I've had with my emails in the past. Thank you again for your prayers and support—very simply, it's what's making all this possible, and I am grateful. As always, I would love to hear from you, although I may have a hard time writing back as long as I'm in The Gambia. When I return I hope I'll be able to somehow convey to you how separate a world this is. Not at all the tragic Africa you see on CNN, and not at all the noble and idealized Africa you see in The Lion King, and yet there's some of both. I'm looking forward very much to sharing it with you.

Until next time,

Jeremy

current mailing address: don't even try. :)