

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

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GENERAL CONFERENCE

Dear Ones,

The theme of the 34th General Conference of the BICC Zimbabwe was “The Church in Times Like These.” Mtshabezi District, in conjunction with the Gwayi District, co-hosted the conference. Preparations began almost immediately after the close of last year’s conference. The “times like these” that the church must deal with are the continued scarcity of hard currency (US\$ and Rand), sporadic fuel shortages, high transportation costs, an interim government attempting to generate revenue by any means possible, continued (though greatly decreased) violence, 90% unemployment, challenges with all means of communication, and a host of related difficulties. The teaching sessions were very appropriate: “The Church in Times Like These Walks in Wisdom,” “The Church in Times Like These Walks in the Way of Forgiveness,” “The Church in Times Like These Walks in the Way of Transformation.” The lessons would be pertinent for the church in almost any time.

As I read through the reports from the various committees it was most discouraging to see the extreme difficulty every church activity encountered. In reality there was no committee that succeeded at practically any activity. In light of the previously mentioned conditions this should hardly be surprising. Approximately 2,500 individuals managed to pay the R50 (US\$6) registration fee for the conference. Total attendance was probably closer to 3,200. The logistical challenges were immense. Fourteen cattle made the ultimate sacrifice. People made contributions of whatever they were able. Each church from the hosting districts was requested to donate one 50kg bag of maize that was ground for roller meal. Local vegetable growers had an opportunity to sell any surplus that they were willing to part with for cash. Bottom line: the conference broke even financially, so that should be an unqualified success from a Zimbabwean perspective.

One striking observation was the absence of an entire generation from the church body. There were extremely few members from the 25-50 age group. There were probably two factors that contributed to this dynamic. First, the church is not immune from the ravages of AIDS. Second, estimates are that ¼ to 1/3 of the population has departed the country for economic factors and is now part of the Zimbabwean Diaspora. It is often the most highly trained individuals from the population that have the opportunities to move elsewhere. The result is a diminished pool of gifted individuals to fill positions of leadership.

The cumulative effects of living with the stress of a collapsing economy seem to be becoming slightly evident. The brief period of hope that accompanied the transitional Government of National Unity is slowly turning to frustration as change is not being accomplished as quickly as expected. Granted that expectations were probably unrealistic, but that does not eliminate the reality of not being able to pay school fees for dependents or being unable to provide adequately for family in a variety of other ways. In spite of perfectly understandable tensions there was still a sincere atmosphere of worship and fellowship. God was there. His people in Zimbabwe realize very faithfully that He is their source of hope.

For us, the highlight of the conference was the opportunity to highlight some of the progress that is being made at EBI. We were expecting perhaps 200-300 to make the walk across the Mtshabezi River to EBI for the library dedication. The large open center of the library had been set up with all of the chairs we could

beg, borrow, or steal that were not already being used at the conference. Bishop Ndlovu came walking into the library where we were waiting with his eyes wide and said, "Steve, we need to move this outside. The whole conference is coming." So we very quickly relocated the chairs and the sound system (thank you Leroy and Connie Kipe) and people just sat around on the ground or stood throughout the one hour program. It was truly an incredible sight and I made sure that Nancy Shenk got some pictures of all of the church ladies, dressed in their uniforms, sitting on their cloths on the ground against the backdrop of the Matopo Hills. The sight was magnificent. Two groups provided special music. Mrs. Nellie Mlotshwa gave a short talk on the "History of EBI." Albert Ndlovu is the chairman of the Theological Administrative Committee and he spoke about "EBI at the Present." The principal of EBI was then able to talk about the "Future of EBI." Finally, Bishop Ndlovu did the dedication for the new building. I did have to apologize because I had said that the library would be finished for Conference but we only succeeded to about 90%. We still have some finishing touches to do that may take about one month and then we will start moving the furniture in and can begin use. I did not realize that this project was started in 1997 and cost approximately \$70,000. From my perspective, it was the ideal opportunity to challenge the Zimbabwe BICC to accept their responsibilities to be regularly financially supportive of the program at EBI. The response from the conference was very good and enough cash was contributed to pay all of the staff for the month of August. God does provide. Struggling is not necessarily bad if it brings us closer to God and increases our faith. Yes, EBI struggles but we will persevere. Thank you also to Graybill and Ethel Brubaker. No, we will not lose heart. Yes, God has privileged us to be part of this ministry. The one sad note that I just heard this morning is that one of the men who worked the longest on the library died yesterday. He was 42 years old and HIV+.

God bless all of you.

Make it count,
Steve and Chris Newcomer

We serve under the auspices of Brethren in Christ World Missions. Contributions towards our ministry may be sent to Brethren in Christ world Missions, PO Box 390, Grantham PA 17027-0390 or in Canada, 2700 Bristol Circle, Oakville, ON L6H 6E1.