



Berdine van den Toren-Lekkerkerker

Link Letter no. 21 | June 2022

Contact details:

berdine.vandentoren@
churchmissionsociety.org



Location: Netherlands



What I do: Resourcing Christian leaders in Africa and Asia through mission education, so that they can resource others for a life of mission.

Dear friends,

Finally, after a period of four and a half years, I am back in Bangui, Central African Republic. This trip has been planned several times, but due to illness and then to the COVID-19 pandemic it had to be postponed again and again.

But this time, all went well! When the doors of the plane opened, I knew I was back. I could smell the specific smell of Bangui and I could not wait to be back at FATEB, the theological school, where Benno and I, with our three boys, lived for eight years. What a joy to see so many old friends, to have time to sit and talk again, to share memories as well as news.

I was asked to teach the MA students in missiology about integral mission and community development. It is a topic close to my heart, especially since my research on community. Lesslie Newbigin writes: "What our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community [...] He committed the entire work of salvation to that community." (Newbigin, 1998) As a result, mission cannot be limited to specific activities or expressed in specific words at specific times; mission is the essence of our Christian life from day to day, wherever we are, whoever we meet. Mission shapes the church as a distinct community that lives by and testifies to the love of God for all of creation. Community is at the heart of this.

But what does this mean in real life?

During one of the classes, when we were discussing conflict in community as barrier to development and different approaches towards conflict transformation and reconciliation, one of the students, a woman, told about the experience of injustice in the Court of Justice. She shared the experiences of women who were raped during the war that ravaged many villages over the last years, and are now testifying before the Court.

These women have lost everything. Some have a child as a result of the rape. Many are rejected by their communities and families, even by their husbands, for the shame they bring. Some are blamed for the rape. If only... they had put on different clothes, had been in another place, had not "invited" the rapists. Completely marginalised, they often seek to hide; the shame is too deep to face. Depression and the physical consequences of rape make it difficult to build their lives and take their place in society again. Several have lost their capacity to speak.



Students in the classroom in Bangui during my recent trip.

Support Berdine van den Toren-Lekkerkerker:
churchmissionsociety.org/vandentoren

**With Jesus
With each other
To the edges**



Now, in the Court of Justice, they hope to find redress, they hope to find justice. But what happens? The people accused of rape and other violent crimes deny all wrongdoing. Their lawyers seek to prove the innocence of the accused by asking the women confrontational and impertinent questions that are experienced as deeply shameful, without any trace of respect. The testimonies of the women are publicly ridiculed and questioned. And through all this, the little that was left of their self-respect is now publicly undermined. The women are stigmatised and victimised all over again.

When the student had finished telling this story, the whole class was silent. A deep silence, after which we asked ourselves: "Where is the Church in this situation? Where is the community that is supposed to be a sign of God's love in this world?" All our thoughts and discussions on justice, restorative justice and other approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation hit reality – a reality that cannot be "solved" in theological reflections from behind a desk. What does it mean, when the Psalmist writes that "peace and justice embrace?" (Psalm 85) What does it mean in this situation to be a community to which God entrusted "the entire work of salvation"? And what would "salvation" even look like for these

women? And what would it look like for the wider society in which these women have to find their place again, the society that also longs for justice?

I know that no one should be counted as guilty before proof of their guilt has been announced by the judge. I know how important it is that each human being has the right of defence. But how does this help the victims? And when in the end the judge declares the accused to be guilty, will the victim then feel that she has found justice? All the questions of the defence will have put even more doubt in the minds of the people around the women. Words and questions that have been expressed cannot be taken back. They cannot be undone. Will a true rehabilitation be possible for these women?

After this conversation we left with more questions than when we entered. I hope and pray that these questions will continue to work their way into the communities where the students are serving. I hope and pray that God will bless these communities with compassion and creativity, so they will find appropriate ways to accompany and encourage these women, to welcome them in their midst, to help them find a home again, a place to belong where they are welcomed and valued, as they are, including their pain and shame. A place where they find renewed dignity in the love of God.

Tomorrow, I will be flying home. It will be good to see Benno and the children again, to come together with the community of Het Pand and Buurtgenoten again. But I will also miss this experience of engaging in theology in a context where so little is obvious and clear.

A heartfelt thank you for all the support given in prayer and resources. This visit has again shaped my thinking in new ways. I pray that it also will be a blessing to the church in the Central African Republic, through the students I met. And I pray that in reading this letter, you too will be encouraged!

With love,
Berdine



Photos from top to bottom: Students in Bangui (Top left); Students from the Women's Bible school (part of FATEB, the school where I taught for many years when we lived in Bangui); The students gave me a gift at the end of my visit.



Going further with Church Mission Society

Prayer is the engine room of mission: Here at CMS, we know that the history of mission is the history of answered prayer. We would love you to join us as a praying community around the world at churchmissionsociety.org/prayer

Please note that opinions expressed in link letters are those of mission partners, not necessarily of Church Mission Society.

If you would like to discuss your mailings with us or to receive this link letter on a regular basis, please email supporter.care@churchmissionsociety.org or call 01865 787400. Church Mission Society is a mission community acknowledged by the Church of England. Registered Company No. 6985330 and Registered Charity No. 1131655 (England and Wales) and SC047163 (Scotland).