



1997

Report from Zimbabwe

Joan K. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Joan K. (1997) "Report from Zimbabwe," *Sacred Heart University Review*. Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol17/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the SHU Press Publications at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sacred Heart University Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact santoro-dillond@sacredheart.edu.

Report from Zimbabwe

Cover Page Footnote

Joan K. Johnson is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Communications Faculty at Sacred Heart University.

JOAN K. JOHNSON

Report from Zimbabwe

Women of the ELCA (W/ELCA) form an auxiliary to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The women have their own budget and choose their own programs within the church. The Woman-to-Woman program made possible a biennial exchange of women between our sixty-five synods and the Lutheran churches of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In 1990, the visitor to New England and Upstate New York Synods was a woman from Zimbabwe named Rugare Shiri. In 1992 it was America's turn to reciprocate. I was chosen to represent the New England and Upstate New York Synods in visit to Zimbabwe. The year I went I was one of twenty-seven women who traveled to twenty-seven countries.

From July 28 to September 2, 1992, I was transported, transplanted, and, I believe, to some extent, transformed by my experiences in a dusty, rocky, struggling, landlocked African country the size of Montana called Zimbabwe. I had read the five books our town library listed under Zimbabwe; I had reviewed all the advice and information from the Woman-to-Woman office; I had even spoken for fifteen minutes to ELCA missionary Lois Snook, in Harare; but I did not feel prepared. What would I find? Would I be able to communicate with the people there? Would we be able to find common ground? How would I fill five weeks in a land of complete strangers? My husband had said, "I'm not worried. I know they'll take good care of you."

He was right. Not once did I feel insecure or in any kind of danger. Of course there were physical discomforts, but they were minor, and every night I was given a soft, warm bed to sleep in, with clean sheets and brightly colored blankets. Buckets of hot water were provided for me, even in areas where water was scarce and open fires the only source of heat and light.

I was given a place of honor and an interpreter at every

Joan K. Johnson is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Communications Faculty at Sacred Heart University.

gathering. I heard glowing and somewhat fulsome speeches praising

my abilities. I was presented with dozens of handmade gifts by women who had very few material possessions but great generosity. And the five weeks flew by. After some initial scrambling, the central office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) obtained for my use both a Toyota four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser and a terrific driver from Lutheran World Federation. The driver, Mr. Hove, was my guardian for most of the five weeks. We covered about 1000 miles. A great deal of it was out in the bush, with no pavement, often with no road at all, just a series of little bushes sliding under the front bumper.

I met, spoke with, and shook hands with at least 2000 women. We came together in churches, parish halls, classrooms, gardens, the bishop's palace, small mud huts and bare, dusty hillsides. We did a lot of dancing, singing, hugging, and laughing. Before one four-hour Sunday service our car was met by over 200 women pouring out of the church, singing, dancing and waving leafy branches. Mr. Hove said, "Here comes the Queen!" I jumped down and joined in the dancing and clapping and was swept into the front of the church and given a seat next to their other guest of honor, a woman who had recently been elected the first female chief in modern times. She and I had a good chat afterwards, and, at the urging of the women, danced together. We also became part of a receiving line of 350 people that curved far out across the field. Men and women of all ages, young people, Sunday School kids and babies carried on their mothers' backs: all gave me their hands and their smiles.

Growing Pains of a Young Democracy

The ELCZ is divided into two districts: the Eastern Deanery and the Western Deanery. My schedule divided my time fairly equally between them. The wife of the bishop, referred to as Mrs. Bishop, is head of the women's organization, called the vashandiri, simply because she is married to the bishop. Similarly, the wives of the two deans – Mrs. Deans – are considered the leaders of the vashandiri within their deaneries. In August, interviews were being conducted to choose a secretary for the entire vashandiri, so that there would be a woman with organizational skills and experience to assist Mrs. Bishop.

Two large barriers to communication and coordination within Zimbabwe are erratic and often non-existent telephone service and lack of reliable transport. While I was there the church office frequently was unable to make out-going calls and, a few times, could not even receive any. Telephone cables are in the process of being installed along the main highways, but many of the missions and parishes are far from a hook-up and, I was told, the cost of such service is beyond many parish budgets.

Cars are exorbitantly expensive. Servicing and repair work is usually done by the owner, and stations that sell high-priced fuel are few and far apart. At my first visit to the church office in Bulawayo I was told that there were no cars for my use. Bishop Siphuma said, with a bit of humor, "Most of our pastors travel by bicycle. Perhaps you can rent a car."

Another circumstance would make many travelers hesitant about taking to the road. There is no police force patrolling the highways. If a vehicle breaks down, the driver must wait for a lift to the nearest garage, frequently two hours away, and pray that his car is still in one piece when he returns. Roads are not lighted, and signs warning of dangerous areas are minimal. Bridges are usually one lane wide and most are eroded at the edges. In sunlight, all this is rather adventurous. After dark, reality sets in and it's no longer fun.

If someone is ill, often the only means of transport to a clinic or hospital is a donkey cart, a four-wheeled wooden box drawn by four tiny, burro-like animals, whose rate of speed is less than that of a healthy person traveling on foot. There are buses, but most are old, in poor repair, and subject to frequent breakdowns. Also, the fare has recently been doubled. One pastor told me that with the rate increase, sick people simply stay home and endure their suffering.

Add to this nearly three years of drought. There is no grass for cattle, and there are frequent power blackouts. Such conditions and circumstances can drive a Westerner to a state of constant frustration and anger. We are not used to being powerless. The people of Zimbabwe have learned to respond to all this with good humor and patience. These people are survivors.

The Vashandiri

At my first presentation to the vashandiri, which occurred at

Highfield ELCZ Church in Highfield, Harare, the first sound I heard upon entering was the women singing Fanny Crosby's "Blessed assurance" in Shona. Then a Mrs. Moyo (first names are seldom used outside the family) delivered a comprehensive speech in English explaining the history, work, and philosophy of the vashandiri. She also described the symbolism of their uniforms.

Yes, the vashandiri wear uniforms. As a matter of fact, I was told that churchwomen of all denominations in Zimbabwe wear uniforms. Those of the vashandiri (women who serve) have grey skirts and purple jackets, with grey collars, cuffs, and belts. They wear grey hats or scarves, also.

Mrs. Moyo explained that the purple is a blend of red and blue. The red reminds us that we are washed in the blood of Jesus. The blue represents God's creation, sea and sky. The grey, white mixed with black, reminds us that though we are sinners and constantly tempted by Satan, we are also constantly striving to be pure and without blemish as Christ is. I was asked, "What kind of uniforms do your women wear?" When I replied that American women do not wear uniforms, I heard, "Why not? Don't you want everyone to know you're a Lutheran? How else will they know?" I had no answer.

At each stop, at each presentation, I met women of strong leadership ability who were filled with joy, as they organized, encouraged, and inspired other vashandiri. To become a member, a woman must be married and must have completed a year of probation, during which she performs service for the organization. At the annual festivals these women are inducted into membership in a ceremony similar to the rite of confirmation. They kneel at the altar, answer questions put by the leaders, make vows, and are prayed for by the pastor and the congregation. A mentor stands behind each probationer. When the ceremony is concluded each mentor places a uniform hat or scarf on the head of her student and the new members file out to return shortly, wearing their new uniforms, to take their place with the other vashandiri. All these women find time to contribute to what my first speaker, Mrs. Moyo, of Hatfield, called "the four wheels of the vashandiri vehicle: spirituality, service, education and handicrafts."

Personalities

One of the best parts of my visit was the friendship offered to me by a series of vashandiri who traveled with me to keep me company, interpret for me, and serve as liaisons to the many groups we visited. The first and last of these was Eunice Hove (distantly related to my driver), who greeted me at the Harare airport and opened her lovely home to me for several days at the start of my journey and at the end. She and her husband are typical of the young urban professionals in Zimbabwe. They have four bilingual children who attend private schools. Eunice is an R.N. currently doing accounting work. Her husband, Underas, is a bank officer. They drive two cars, one of which belongs to the bank. They have a live-in housekeeper (as do most families, even some not so well off) and about two acres of property enclosed by a high wall with a locked iron gate. There is a swimming pool and a chicken yard and a vegetable garden.

The Hoves are loyal ELCZ members. Underas Hove serves on many church boards and is involved with projects to finance food distribution and water conservation. Eunice is treasurer of her vashandiri. Her uncle, Dr. F.K. Gambiza, is principal (president) of the United Theological College in Harare and her aunt, Millie Gambiza, is a home economics teacher who is working to educate rural women in practical family nutrition.

Maina Siphuma, the wife of the bishop and president of the ELCZ vashandiri, was also my host and escort. Before her husband's elevation, she was headmistress of a school. She and the bishop and their two sons were generous with their time and she and her sons took me on a tour of the splendid Museum of Natural History in Bulawayo. Another woman who spent several days with me was the wife of the Eastern Dean, Francisca Mafunduse. She and Evans Mtombeni, secretary of the Eastern vashandiri, accompanied me to The Great Zimbabwe, the country's national monument. The three of us climbed all over it, and I learned much national history.

Later Dean Mafunduse took me and a visiting group of Swedish students, who were studying the Shona language, on a visit to a local chief. The chief said he was born in 1900 and had eight wives and forty-one children. He lamented the changes in society that have lessened the authority of the tribal leaders, but he said that he realized that his descendants must be prepared to survive in a different world.

Mrs. Mafunduse also took me to a vashandiri festival where there was, among other events, a mock wedding. The wedding was arranged as a device to raise money for a much-needed bus for the vashandiri of the Eastern Deanery. I was the bride; my groom was one of the vashandiri. Our wedding guests took turns dancing forward to place a gift in a basket. The gifts totalled only \$300, but the women were optimistic about eventually financing a bus.

Mrs. Dean Dube, whose husband is dean of the Western Deanery, was also my host. I enjoyed her expertly prepared meals and the comfort of the guest cottage for several days at two different stages of my journey.

The two Mrs. Deans are responsible for housing accommodations and food for an endless stream of visitors which may include foreign guests, students, retreat groups, pastoral seminars and teacher training sessions. Each mission has about fifty acres of land on which are placed the parsonage, the deans's home (at Manama and Masvingo), a church, guest house, Bible school, dormitory, teachers' residences, a dining hall and, perhaps, a clinic or hospital. There is also a well, called a bore hole, and often an electric pump. Dean Mafunduse told me that the first thing he listens for each morning is the sound of the pump. If it is silent, everyone is in danger. There are also herds of goats and chickens and, in drought-free times, cows and sheep.

Mrs. Mtombeni spent one night with me sleeping on the floor in a mud hut, out in the bush. Ours was the most private of a group of four huts. We had only a candle for light. When it was spent I heard a rustling above us, in the thatched roof. It made me feel close to nature as I envisioned a small bird or squirrel-like animal burrowing into the straw. This idyllic image was broken when Mrs. Mtombeni whispered to me, "Mrs. Johnson, did you hear that noise?" When I remarked about how pleasant it was, she began to laugh. We lit a second candle and she told me, "When I heard it, I thought of snakes! I got up on my hands and knees and began to pray to God. 'Please, God, don't let the American visitor be killed tonight! Please allow me to return to my five children!' " Apparently, her prayers were answered. After a fit of laughter, at my innocence and her fear, we stumbled out the door into the dark in search of a private place to relieve ourselves.

Many of the leaders have had the opportunity to travel abroad. The Mafunduses spent time in Germany. Ambrose Moyo, deputy to

Bishop Siphuma, and his wife, Iris, spent ten years in Boston, during which time he earned a degree at Harvard and taught there, and she had three children and became an R.N. The Moyos were also my hosts on two separate occasions. Iris is a Zulu from South Africa. They have collected many artifacts from their travels and gifts from friends abroad. They have a Swedish tablecloth just like the one I inherited from my husband's mother, and when Ambrose came to the Bulawayo airport to see me off he was wearing a sweatshirt his Harvard students had given him. It had an American flag in a pointillist design over the words, "We, the people."

Another couple who remain in my memory are Pastor and Mrs. Suwela, who operate a mission at Chituripasi, in the Western Deanery. For ten years they have labored to serve, inspire, and care for several hundred people who look to them for spiritual guidance, practical help, friendship and education, including-for the women-instruction in basket making and sewing. The Suwelas have seven children. At the mission there is no electricity, no telephone, one very old car and, daily, less and less water. But there is a grinding mill, visited all day long by women bearing on their heads fifty kilo bags of maize to be ground into mealie-meal (slightly finer than corn meal, with a texture like granulated sugar).

Every evening there are family devotions. Pastor Suwela begins a hymn in a rich, very deep baritone; his wife leaps in with her strong mezzo, and all the children join in, harmonizing effortlessly, having memorized every word of many long hymns. Mrs. Suwela told me that their parish is the poorest in Zimbabwe, but she is fiercely proud of the vashandiri, who welcomed me with great warmth.

Rugare Shiri

Our 1990 visitor from Zimbabwe was Rugare Shiri, whose husband was bishop at that time. She invited me to attend a two-day workshop for single mothers that she presented at Manama, which is also the seat of the Western Deanery. In her home, which is a few blocks from the bishop's palace in Bulawayo, she showed me a number of gifts and remembrances which she keeps on display to remind her of her visit to New York, New England, and Anaheim.

Mrs. Shiri has introduced to Zimbabwe women two structures

that she found in use in neighboring countries. One is a one-family granary. This is a three-sided, square building measuring about eight by eight feet, with a height of seven feet. It consists of a double wall with the space between the walls to be filled with grain. The inner wall is open at the top to allow the grain to be poured in. There are several small metal doors at floor level, to allow the owner to remove grain from the bottom of the pile, thus ensuring that the supply will remain fresh. The design of the granary allows it to be built by one or two people, at very little cost, using native brick and concrete. It is waterproof, well-ventilated, and can be maintained by one person. I interviewed a woman who invited me to examine and photograph her granary, and she noted that the compact structure can hold enough grain to feed a family of seven for five years.

Another of Mrs. Shiri's projects is the brick stove. In rural areas, cooking is done outside, over an open fire. Because of the drought, firewood is in scarce supply, and women spend a good part of each day gathering dry twigs and branches from the nearly bare hillsides. The brick stove is small, about twenty-four by eighteen inches, with a height of eighteen inches. It is made of mud bricks plastered with concrete. On top is a metal plate with two round holes. To introduce the brick stove to rural women, Mrs. Shiri had two dozen of them built in an open space in front of a maternity hospital at Manama. Women about to deliver usually arrive there two or three weeks prior to their due dates. There they can see for themselves how to operate the stoves and observe how well they conserve fuel.

I interviewed one woman who had been chosen to be the first in her parish to be given a stove. She demonstrated it with great pride. When it was installed in her round thatched hut a stovepipe was added to allow smoke and soot to be removed from the home. It was on the floor, close to the wall, and took up very little space. She told me, "The stove is so beautiful it made our home look shabby, so my husband and I added a brick wall to the inside of our home to match the stove. Now, my pots and pans remain clean, there is very little wasted food from spills, and we wake up to a warm hut with hot water for bathing. When I cooked over an open fire I used one cartload of wood a day. With the brick stove I need only one cartload of wood a week." The granary and the brick oven are funded by the vashandiri and by gifts from Women of the ELCA and LWR.

Garden and Food Projects

Vegetables and fruit have become scarce in Zimbabwe. Garden Projects have been organized in many parishes to alleviate this shortage. The LWF's Food for Work program provides wire for fences, garden tools, and concrete to construct shallow irrigation ditches for these gardens. The vashandiri do the work. I visited three of the projects and spoke to many of the women who developed them and who continue to tend them. I was told that the food from Garden Projects is made available to local people and is also sold to wholesalers who market the produce in cities. Thousands of people are nourished by these gardens. Tomatoes, onions, pumpkins, squash, carrots, cabbage, rape (a kind of lettuce), and celery as well as sugar cane, oranges, lemons, bananas, and mangoes are harvested continuously.

The women showed me a concrete canal that they had constructed following printed instructions from the LWF. Each worker, besides receiving maize as pay, has her own garden plot. There was a great deal of camaraderie, laughter, and singing during the work day.

Another and perhaps even more vital project involves the installation of grinding mills throughout the rural areas. Maize must be ground into mealie-meal which is made into sadza (grits), the staff of life in Zimbabwe. Women must walk miles to these mills. The vashandiri and the ELCZ are working to install one grinding mill in each mission to allow more women to be served more conveniently. The grinding mills are housed in brick and concrete structures. They require an area of about ten by twelve feet. The mills run on diesel fuel and are designed to have parts that can easily be adjusted and serviced. At each installation women are being trained to run and service the machines.

I was told that most of the maize now feeding most of the rural areas is a gift from America. One pastor told me that the maize from America had been grown as cattle feed. Here it nourishes people.

Education

The vashandiri are also engaged in the education of women. There have been no public schools in Zimbabwe for ten years. At one Vashandiri Center, in Gweru, in the Eastern Deanery, I visited classrooms where young women are taught typing, shorthand, book-keeping, and dressmaking. The courses take several weeks and the girls sleep in a dormitory. I was put up in a room next to the dormitory. The next day I did a presentation for the vashandiri who were there and I was delighted to see on a wall a copy of an African tapestry that hangs in the office of the New England Synod in Worcester, Massachusetts. The women were astonished when I showed them a photograph of the tapestry from my album. It is a gift to New England from African Lutherans.

Elsewhere, in what are called Non-Formal Education programs, women are being taught to assemble, service, and repair sewing machines. All education is aimed toward helping rural women become more self-sufficient and independent. The vashandiri organization teaches many leadership skills and is a force for building members' self-esteem.

Marketing Handicrafts

Of great concern to the women of Zimbabwe is the task of marketing their handiwork. I saw hundreds of baskets, trays, wall hangings, and mats, as well as examples of pottery, embroidery knitting, and crocheting. While much of this work is simply utilitarian, I saw a large number of pieces that revealed originality, meticulous detail, an eye for design and even a sense of whimsy.

Everywhere I went I was asked for advice on marketing. After explaining that I knew nothing about marketing in the professional sense, I made two suggestions. My first suggestion was to contact the business or marketing department of a local university and ask if a student could be allowed to offer the women his advice and time for academic credit. That way, the women would receive free, up-to-date advice and the student would receive both academic credit and a new line on his résumé.

My other suggestion was to ask any members of the congregation who ran a store or garage if the women could have some space to display their samples. I suggested that someone with artistic skills be

asked to make attractive signs and labels and that the women take turns at the display. I also advised them to specialize, with each one doing only what she does best, to offer to personalize, with names, dates, or messages, the items they make, and to experiment with designing wares with an outline map of Zimbabwe on them. I also advised them to set up a single mailing address to add to their signs as well as the statement, "Handmade by the women of Zimbabwe" and "Available in your choice of color and design." I realize this was just off the top of my head, but they were very pleased with my suggestions, and several of the leaders told me that they would try to follow them.

Another possible source of income for the vashandiri can come from the use of a simple button machine. They were fascinated by all my pins and buttons and the Women of the ELCA seals and wanted to know how they could obtain them. I had passed out descriptions of the significance of our logo and our purpose statement. I told them that, while I was pleased to distribute the W/ELCA gifts I had brought, that I believed that they should develop their own logo. At the annual, four-day festivals the vashandiri have a singing competition. I suggested that next year they also hold an art competition to design a logo, perhaps one for the entire ELCZ vashandiri, and, perhaps some for individual parishes. Then they could work out a way to duplicate the design (perhaps with the advice of a school art teacher) and be ready to produce buttons for sale to all the vashandiri. Our synod's Executive Board has pledged to provide some button machines with a supply of blank buttons for this purpose, to be sent to the mission at Chituripasi.

My Presentations

At each presentation I put up a large map of the U.S. and passed around an enlarged map of New England and Upstate New York. I had two letters of greeting read and translated, one from Nancy Wogman, president of the New England Synod W/ELCA, and one from the co-presidents of my own congregation. I also passed around one copy of Unit Models for Mission. Every leader requested a copy. I will send ten to each deanery.

I passed out bookmarks with the purpose statement, also. To each

of these I had attached a mailing label bearing the name and address of one of our synod's women, to encourage correspondence. (At our synod's convention, six women had already received letters.) From the Upstate New York synod came 250 pencils embossed with their name. These were distributed.

I gave each group one copy of *The Lutheran* supplement which described the NES-W/ELCA (one page explaining the logo, one each of the letters of greeting) and included six songs: "Blessed assurance," "Come, ye disconsolate," "Shall we gather at the river," "We're marching to Zion," "Borning cry," and "Weave." These were to be duplicated so that each woman would have her own mementos of the visit.

They were particularly fond of the W/ELCA seals. When one woman asked if she could have one, I asked her if she had a book or notebook to put it on. I soon found that paper is a luxury. No one had such things in the rural areas. She said, "Can you put it on my uniform?" I put a seal on her lapel, and she clapped her hands and shouted with joy. Then the others wanted seals on their lapels. In the rear of the room were four men, the pastor, the evangelist (an unordained assistant) and two caretakers. They asked if they could have seals, too. I said, "Do you realize that it says, 'Women of the ELCA?'" They nodded, smiling, and pointed to their lapels. After that, I began placing the seals on the doorways of huts, on lecterns and any where else they wanted them.

At each session I taught the songs and presented the president with a small wooden lighthouse with the seal on it. These were made for me by Eric Hultgren, a woodcarver who is a member of our congregation. He had also given me three models of our church. I gave one to Mrs. Siphuma, one to Dr. Gambiza, president of the United Theological College, and one to a Mrs. Phiri, an elderly woman who was recommended to me as a staunch, long-time member of the vashandiri who was no longer able to attend meetings. I also gave Mrs. Siphuma a wooden plaque of the logo. Last, but not least, I distributed 144 yellow balloons to all the children who came to our meetings.

A large part of each session involved a lively question and answer period and several songs and dances. I learned some degree of patience and flexibility during these visits. At one stop I was advised

by my current mentor, "Just bring greetings. We have to be back at the mission for a meeting by two o'clock." We left the car and were led to a table set up beside a Garden Project. I was invited to sit down, given a hand-printed program and was told, "You're number seven."

Closing Comments

Near the end of my visit Iris Moyo and I were driven to the Hwange Game Farm and spent one glorious night at the Safari Lodge. We saw giraffes, zebras, and elephants close-up, in their natural habitat. Then we drove to Victoria Falls and marveled over the vast torrent of rushing water whose continual spray makes possible a small rain forest.

I have nothing to add about the drought. Everything is brown except the dusty green thorn trees, which nourish the goats. We crossed perhaps fifty bridges marked with the names of rivers, but we saw no water, just dry bushes becoming brittle in the cracked river beds. There is still enough drinking water, but the supply grows less and less. At the game farm the watering holes have shrunk to about one-quarter of their original size. Even the huge Victoria Falls are only about half their former volume. A few dams provide irrigation for the Garden Projects, but everyone dreads another dry rainy season and prays for respite.

Zimbabwean hospitality and graciousness are overwhelming. The vashandiri treated me with great kindness and generosity. They urged me to remain longer, some with tears. One said, "Come back as a missionary." Another asked, "Can I name my baby after you?" When my final presentation ended, the women sang, "God be with you till we meet again" in Shona and in English. I was deeply moved.

At the last, church-wide four-day festival, held in Manama, the bishop honored me by delivering his entire address in English. I made a brief closing speech, presented my last two lighthouses to the two Mrs. Deans, and led the 500 women present in singing "Kum bah ya" and "Weave."

On the night before my departure, in Harare, Dr. and Mrs. Gambiza invited me to be their guest with the Hoves, along with Eunice's sister and her husband. We had a sumptuous dinner in a private dining room at a local hotel. They spent the evening asking me

to describe my experiences. As we left they thanked me for coming to Zimbabwe.