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# FIDESCO

Dear Sponsors, Family, and Friends,

As we enter our sixth month of mission we reflect back on the past months which seem to have flown by. The daily obligations and ubiquitous needs of young children make it difficult to recall what we've done with all of that time! We go pretty non-stop through the work week, so when we reach the weekend we like to step back and take time for the family. Most Saturdays we all pop into the shared van for a drive into "town" for groceries. Afterward there's laundry, and a bit of cleaning (sometimes a nap?) and we're ready for the children to be in bed leaving a few hours in the evening where Margaret and I get some "us" time. If there's time we enjoy reading, watching a show, or listening to an audiobook.



With the growing heat, we have ventured less on foot outside the mission due both to small bodies that wilt quickly in the sweltering heat, and for safety reasons (mostly venomous snakes such as mambas and cobras which come out in the summer to bask in the sun). Thus, aside from grocery shopping, official business, prenatal appointments, and the occasional outing as part of a larger group, we haven't been off site much. Pulling together parts from three old bicycles, I was able to create a working product for Patrick to ride which has really sped up his recreation. Naturally Caroline was hot to follow and luckily there was a small two-wheeler which I removed the pedals from to convert into a balance bike for her; fortunately she likes the squeaking it makes. The paved driveways make excellent runways for the kids to scoot around and they have also found a new sport in swinging on the dead – but not fallen – branches of large palms; a reprehensible activity that goes largely unseen. Climbing trees is also a popular pastime for them. Indeed, we found out a tree next to our house had a resident rock python removed from it last year, and this month I had the excitement of taking part in a cobra-extraction (unsuccessful). We're never lacking for young friends to play soccer with and many days after school or on the weekends we have knocks on the door for Patrick and Caroline to come out and play (that is our door in the background of the above photo – the first four windows of the building comprise our portion of the convent). We have learned that to make soccer



accessible to the blind you simply wrap the ball in a plastic grocery bag allowing it to be heard on the field. Another popular auditory game that we play with the blind students is called “goal-ball.” Teams of three face off in the school hall between two chairs for goal posts. Any player with any amount of vision wears a blindfold. Then the teams take turns rolling a special ball that has bells inside of it, trying to

get it past the opposite team’s defense and between the goalposts. This game is a bit too fast paced for the children, but for them there is always the school playground to explore complete with all the unprotected drop-offs, sharp protrusions, and ridiculously fast slides you could ask for. As you can see, we have found no shortage of opportunities to recreate together!



One of the gifts of mission that we have begun to experience more fully is the joy of living in close community both with the blind/VI students who board onsite in the hostels and the local villagers. Passing through the village we see the St. Francis uniforms hanging out on the many laundry lines just as Patrick’s is hanging on our own line and we feel a sense of oneness. On Sundays we sing together at Mass; we are slowly picking up the words of the traditional African hymns and Mass parts in Sepedi. We learn their stories and we live the ups and downs together. When two children from our village were lost and found dead in December, we mourned with the community and felt the pain of losing a child. When eighteen infants were baptized at the Christmas Day Mass, we experienced the happiness of their families. When a most beloved teacher died recently from bone cancer, we cried together at the memorial Mass. When several of the blind students from the hostel earned their “bachelor matric” (the highest of 6 passing grades on the final high school exam and one that gains admittance to a university program) we celebrated with them and were touched with pride. In January we were present for the deaconate ordination of Deacon Welcome. He grew up in our village and attended St. Francis Academy, so this was a big event for our parish. The Mass itself was full of resplendent singing and we were moved to tears by the beauty of the sacrament. Patrick made a card and gave Deacon Welcome two of his favorite “crystals” collected from the site – a surprising but most enjoyed gift prompting the new deacon to give public thanks while acknowledging that he understood the value of the gift because he knows how much Patrick cherishes these crystal rocks. This was delivered amid much laughter and applause, South Africans being largely used to such abundant mineral wealth. Being in solidarity through these highs and lows has been meaningful for us as we sometimes see the insidious vestiges of apartheid even though it fell over twenty years ago.

Since our last communication one school year ended on November 30 and a new one began on January 11. In RSA, most people take Christmas or “summer” holidays from about the middle of December to the middle of January. One of our responsibilities was taking care of the farm while the other employees were gone on their holidays. This meant we took our holiday earlier (December 1 – 15<sup>th</sup>)

which not only cut holiday prices and traffic in half, but allowed us to easily book our lodging relatively late for a long driving tour of the northeastern part of the country. Carpooling with our co-volunteers Ernö and Gwendoline, we drove over 2,600 km (1,625 mi.) in a clockwise loop; beginning east from our site entering into the province of Mpumalanga. Gaining altitude we passed hours of pines, birches, and other timber woods – finally descending down steep rolling hills into KwaZulu-Natal province with its sugar cane breaks and sub-tropical climate to the small jungle hamlet of Saint Lucia on the Indian Ocean where we spent the majority of our holiday. We luxuriated in long days of playing at the beach, exploring tide pools and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Caroline’s highlight was the baby hippos in the Saint Lucia Estuary; for Patrick it was seeing a crocodile in the wild. From there we headed south along the coastline to the bustling port city of Durban where we were able to get in a few hours of fun at the Maritime Museum before it began to rain...and didn’t let up until we left two days later! Then it was on to the little town of Bethlehem in the Free State province where two Fidesco volunteers are assigned on local diocesan projects. One serves at Fazenda Esperanza, a rehabilitation farm for those with drug and alcohol addictions. The other is a seminarian who has a pastoral role in the four parishes of the local township. Visiting the township we saw a piece of South African history that is not particularly pretty. Townships were apartheid-era urban living areas designated for “Africans” and “Coloreds.” Today there



is much vibrancy in the life and people, though the area remains marked by poverty. While in Bethlehem, we also had the great enjoyment of day hiking up the sandstone hills and through the echoing cliff bands of the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. After a fun few days we again set sail, this time north to Gauteng (“gold”) province and the largest city in RSA, Johannesburg. Here we visited more Fidesco volunteers who serve people with disabilities alongside an order of religious sisters from India. The organization - called Little Eden - has two locations: one in the agricultural village of Bapsfontein on the eastern periphery of the city and one in urban Edenvale. Two Fidesco volunteers are located at each center. The ages of the residents span from preschool to elderly. The more mobile residents live at the farm in Bapsfontein, including many adults and youth who have Down syndrome. We joined them for prayer and Adoration in their chapel and were quite moved by their spontaneous intentions and singing of Kumbaya. The residents at the Edenvale home tend to have greater needs and less mobility. Some are at Little Eden because they were abandoned as children and others are brought later in life by their families when their needs at home become too great for the family to handle. It was a tremendous experience for our entire family to be able to visit the other Fidesco missions in South Africa. Being around so many different people in different circumstances sparked a great many conversations with Patrick and Caroline about the beauty of our shared human dignity and our call to love like Jesus loves. All in all our travels gave us a great chance to connect with our fellow volunteers and a real insight into the diversity of land and animal life that the country has to offer. After our travels, all the aforementioned Fidesco volunteers came here to



our site to share the Christmas weekend (pictured above). A great joy!

And now a bit about our respective roles...

On the farm we've moved from assessment to implementation mode. Returning from break, I found to my chagrin that the weeds had not been controlled in my absence during the sunniest/wettest part of the summer. With challenge comes opportunity and so, after shifting some personnel, we now have an ambitious young man named Mr. Jacky working alongside me in the farm. Mr. Jacky is in his mid-twenties and is as enthusiastic as he is energetic. This huge change of attitude has kick started my ideas into action! First we dealt with our current situation. Working together over a month's time, we cleared the swaths of the sometimes chest-tall weeds from both of the garden enclosures and the dryland portion of the farm. Time consuming as this was, the upshot was that such a "tabula rasa" allowed me the luxury of slowly and methodically implementing each strategy outlined in our program from start to finish, while simultaneously giving Mr. Jacky instruction. I have found him an apt pupil and, given time, believe him capable of full leadership over the farm. We are already seeing some evidence of our hard work paying off!

We're in mid-summer now, so everywhere is bursting with activity and we are raking in the fruits of our



labor. After the requisite eight weeks the compost pile came to fruition with some excellent fertilizer. We harvested most of the summer vegetables from the November planting. We had a bumper harvest of green peppers: several wheelbarrows-

full with some fat fist-sized bells and many more on the bushes. Before the Christmas holiday we harvested all of the spinach for the kitchen to chop and freeze for use in 2017; we even had a bit of surplus which we sold fresh. We also pulled up all of the onions and beets as well as a tray full of peri peri chili peppers and dried them over break on the floor of the empty kitchen. We are still growing a fraction of our remaining spinach plants but these are tapering off and will be culled when the new crop we just planted comes



in. The cabbage was also a good crop – about a hundred heads harvested thus far with some still in the field. The tomatoes did surprisingly well despite my failed attempt at improving the staking. We collected about 20 kg (~45 lb) in December which Margaret and I cleaned, de-stemmed, and froze, then



another 10 kg of stragglers. I made a change for the November tomatoes from the usual local practice of tying individual plants to gnarled wooden sticks to using neat trellises with wire strung between rebar rods which I thought would be an improvement. Unfortunately, the crop was much fuller than I anticipated and bent the steel rods inward allowing many of the plants to touch the ground resulting in fruit touching the ground with the

subsequent crop loss and disease onset. For the recent planting we upgraded to alternating rebar stakes with stout wooden poles which I think will solve that problem. Sister Fides and the cooks have reworked the school kitchen menu to utilize all these fresh vegetables – apparently this was not possible before with the scanty and irregular harvest coming in. I keep hearing “*eish*, too much vegetables” from the cooks Grace and Johanna, but that is music to my ears. We still have a way to go before we fully support the kitchen continuously, but the progress is encouraging.

For our recent, mid-summer planting we have been forging onward putting down new garden plots at a fast pace while trying to maintain “AT STANDARD” in all that we do. We are planning plots carefully to match the needs of the kitchen, while at the same time following a 3-cycle crop rotation to maintain the quality of our soil. First the “heavy feeders” like tomatoes, green peppers, spinach, and cabbage that pull many nutrients from the soil. Next we plant “nitrogen fixers;” legumes (pod crops) which replenish the soil nutrient balance. Many legume types are either not easy to come by in RSA or are completely unfamiliar to our cooks, so we are limiting ourselves to string beans, peas, and snow peas. Finally, the “light feeders” – the root crops – onions, beetroot, carrots, etc. Then the cycle begins again. In the ground right now are carrots, onions, cabbages, spinach, beetroot, tomatoes, green and chili peppers, legumes, and some herbs. Outside of the two garden enclosures we have a dryland field of mealies (AKA corn or maize) and sunflowers.

In my role on the farm, I am experiencing a fresh appreciation for the simple elements that make plants grow: sun, water, soil. I find myself frequently checking the weather forecast for the next rain – both because of the decrease in temperature that it brings, as well as the elimination of hours of hand-watering thirsty plants. Working all day in the field, I have a renewed respect for the farm workers so ubiquitous in our world’s fertile valleys.

One new development that we are all very excited about is the addition of an environmental education program at the farm that has been put together for Grades 4-9. As part of their natural sciences curriculum, each class has a full period in the garden each week. I put them to work planting, weeding, harvesting, watering, laying out plots, shifting compost, and any other age-appropriate work we have on hand. Although this tends to mean a lot more time investment for us it surely yields tenfold benefits for the “learners” and we have already seen a lot of enthusiasm from them. Watching the looks on their faces as they learn about the wonderful cycles of nature and are exposed to the elegance of God’s bountiful creation is very rewarding.



Over in the chicken yard transition is the theme, with some birds getting out on top and others, well, into the pot. As mentioned in our last letter, I had been carefully watching and marking the aging flock to see who the layers are. On January 9<sup>th</sup> the cull took place, with 27 of our 70 birds being harvested for the kitchen. The whole process lasted about three hours. Having been party to a lot of chicken butchering in my rural Pennsylvania youth I was well aware of the general order of things. Participation, however, is a far cry from orchestration. Furthermore the dearth of proper supplies for the job (such as

sharp knives!) made the preparatory period last rather longer than anticipated. We improvised for a scalding pot by setting a kitchen coffee pot to heat the water above a non-working scalding and filling it periodically which ended up working out great. So far the results are encouraging with egg numbers holding steady after an almost 40% reduction in the henhouse. I have since been making calls all over RSA for production quality birds to re-stock the flock. It is one thing to walk into a village and buy a few “layers,” but it is quite another matter to procure birds at point-of-lay that will give 300 eggs per year. The new feeding trough I repurposed seems to be working as we’ve all noticed a reduction in both guinea fowl and rat presence. We built a small roof over it to keep off the rain and reroofed the outside laying boxes. I’m feeling pretty good about where we’re sitting after these changes. -D



The new school year is now well underway. I still have to catch myself from referring to each class as their grade level from 2016 as it is so different for me to have grade level advancement happen between December and January. Since the holiday break is shorter here I have to say that there is much less noticeable change in the students as they advance from one grade level to the next. In some ways this is good, it seems the students haven’t suffered too much from the summer setback that students in the US sometimes have when they

return to school in the fall. On the other hand there is not a marked change in growth or maturity that you also see in the US after summer. My course load for this new year is everything I was doing before with the addition of daily English instruction for the grade 9 students. It has been a good challenge so far, not least of all because there are thirty-eight students in the class! That is about average class size here; some are a bit smaller and a few have over forty students. Whew! For grade 9 I have a set curriculum to follow from the Department of Basic Education, so I have been learning that as quickly as possible. Some of the skills, like analyzing cartoons and advertisements, are quite new for me to teach as part of an English curriculum. There is the added challenge of making all of the materials accessible to my blind and VI students. Fortunately we have a dedicated staff member in the “Center for Accessible Material Production” who makes braille and large print copies. Reading the braille assignments is up to teachers though and I am painfully slow. The basic alphabet itself is not so bad, but there is a whole additional language of shortcuts for commonly used words (such as lowercase “ab” for “about” or lowercase “sd” for “said”) that is much more tedious to learn. You can look up a UEB braille chart if you are interested in knowing more.

In my weekly library classes I enjoy the freedom of dovetailing what we do with the regular classroom English teachers while not having to follow an explicit curriculum. From what I gather, the students previously watched movies almost all the time during library class; every now and then I get the request of “ma’am, can’t





we just watch a movie?” It is a difficult precedent to follow, but they are growing in their eagerness to engage in class. When I call on students, however, they often cover their mouths and act tongue-tied for an answer. They are more familiar with a didactic teaching method and as such don’t quite know what to do when I ask them to share responses and be more active learners, but they thrive on praise. We are working on higher order thinking skills and formulating thorough responses; the leadership of the school is encouraging this across subject areas. For all the classes the greatest needs are fluency and comprehension. The students do lots of work in the classroom with components of language but there is very little opportunity or availability to read complete books. I have been drawing on free resources from the internet and the school library’s collection of audio books to bring the students into the richness of literature. I had to smile recently when as I went to pause the audio book of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe the grade six students were literally on the edge of their seats saying “noo don’t stop!” I think it is safe to say that they are enjoying the story. Reading with them also provides a great platform to learn new vocabulary words. It isn’t always easy to measure “success” in the classroom, but recently I felt I had sparked something when a grade five student came to me and said that she had heard a vocabulary word over the weekend. I inquired, and she responded that in a TV show a character said “hello my inquisitive friends” – inquisitive was a word we had found in a story – yay! Another time a friend Patrick was playing with referred to a candy treat as scrumptious. These little examples are day brighteners for me.



Knitting classes have been equally fruitful. Many students went home for the December holidays with projects to give as gifts or use for themselves. Grade 8 and 9 students take the class for only one term each year while Grade 10 and 11 students take the class for the entire school year. In the case of the former, every ten or twelve weeks I have a new group of students to teach

knitting to, whereas in the latter I get the continuity of working on more complex projects with the same students. It’s a nice balance. You can see in the pictures a group of last year’s grade 8 students showcasing their completed hats and Chester - a VI student now in Grade 11 - wearing his creation which he ended up delighting his grandma with for Christmas.

As the blind/VI boarders have gotten to know us better we have found that they are comfortable soliciting our help in both personal and academic matters. We are honored by their trust. Not long after we arrived, the grade 10 and 11 (now 11 and 12) students came to Dominic and me asking if we would make ourselves available during their daily study time for additional help with math and English. Their self-motivation really struck us and we enjoy our informal tutoring time with them. Sometimes it

is a large group of ten or fifteen who meet with us and other times just a handful. One time a student named Martin came after memorizing several dozen idioms completely to satisfy his own interest. He rattled these off purely from memory and asked us to explain each one; we were wowed by his initiative and capacity for auditory memorization. Another time we were illustrating surface area for the blind students and were running around gathering 3D objects for them to feel since these manipulatives are not available in the classroom. It was neat to watch the spark of understanding as they investigated the shapes. **-M**

We continue to be humbled by your outpouring of support for our mission here; you remain in our prayers. It is difficult to explain just what it means to us to experience your generosity but suffice it to say that it is tremendously encouraging especially during some of the tougher moments.

