

An Update of the Fruits, Vegetables, and Environmental Education Program of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

by Dan Turk, PC(USA) mission co-worker, 31 August 2021

Synoda Lehibe in Sambava

It took 40 hours to drive the 800 miles from Antananarivo to Sambava, the world's vanilla capital in northeastern Madagascar. The road is theoretically paved the 610 miles to Ambilobe but potholes and sand have reclaimed much of the asphalt. Much of the rest of the road is being prepared for paving. Rolland Razafiarison did the trip in about 3.5 days, not counting the half day he spent at the Mango Palace at Mahatsinjo, 5 hours out of Antananarivo. Rolland, technical director of the Fruits, Vegetables, and Environmental Education Program (FVEE) of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM), went to Sambava to represent the FVEE at the FJKM's Synoda Lehibe (=General Assembly) which is held every 4 years except that this time it got delayed a year because of Covid-19. It was Rolland's first time to Sambava. I was unable to make the trip because Elizabeth and I are still in the US due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. I spoke frequently with Rolland via WhatsApp and he sent many photographs.



Part of the road to Sambava



The FJKM church at Sambava where the Synoda Lehibe meeting was held 11-18 August

Rolland's main activity at the Synoda Lehibe was to present a poster display about the work of the FVEE. He and I collaborated to produce 7 posters. They generated quite a lot of interest which led to several invitations. One of the most immediate is to speak at the next meeting of the FJKM Evangelism Department with all 70+ evangelists in Manakara on 24 September 2021. The Evangelism Department had already invited the FVEE to train the evangelists plus a volunteer technician from each evangelism post. For the FJKM, an evangelist is a pastor who serves in a remote area where the local Christian community is not yet strong enough to support a pastor. The central office of the FJKM pays the salaries of the evangelists while they work to spread the gospel and strengthen the FJKM community to get to the point where it can support a pastor. In essence, the evangelists are missionaries of the FJKM within Madagascar. The first training for the evangelists and volunteer technicians is now scheduled to take place at the Mango Palace at Mahatsinjo on 28-30 September, shortly after the meeting in Manakara.

Many of the evangelist posts are in the south, where Madagascar is currently experiencing near famine-like conditions from a combination of drought, climate change, and economic hardship due to measures to contain the spread of Covid-19. The training of evangelists from the south will be part of the FVEE's efforts to extend its work into the south to contribute to help reduce hunger. Another component will be to help the FJKM church at Beloha set up a mango nursery.





The FVEE (MFEE) display at the Synoda Lehibe meeting in Sambava

The FJKM pastor from Ambovombe near the southern tip of Madagascar was among the people whom Rolland spoke with at the Synoda Lehibe. The pastor told Rolland that the feeding programs that are ongoing to get emergency food to those most in need are helping but that at each food distribution event, there are some who get food and some who do not. The pastor said that the food distribution is mostly happening in the larger cities; people in more remote rural areas are not getting help. With drought and dire economic conditions due to Covid-19 likely to continue, the hunger situation in the South is likely to get worse into 2022. The FJKM synod president from southern Madagascar, Pastor Soja Arthur, spoke to Elizabeth while at the Synoda Lehibe. He expressed appreciation to all who have contributed to help the people in southern Madagascar.



Vanilla growing near Sambava



Rolland Razafiarison and vanilla drying in Sambava, the vanilla capital of the world

When my colleagues and I go on trips, we usually take trees with us to plant and then bring other trees back. This trip was not an exception. Rolland took some grafted fruit trees (mangos, a canistel, and a mamey sapote among others) along with some endangered endemic palms (*Beccariophoenix fenestralis*) to use at the exposition at the Synoda Lehibe and then to plant at nearby churches and schools. Rolland left trees for planting at the FJKM church where the Synoda Lehibe took place, at the FJKM church in Antalaha where he worshiped on Sunday 15 August, and at the FJKM school in Sambava.



The principal of the FJKM school at Antalaha receiving fruit trees for planting at the school

Rolland brought back 3 endangered *Dalbergia* trees from a local nursery as well as germinating coconuts from the Soavoanio project, which produces highly productive dwarf coconut trees in its large nursery. Most of the coconuts were left at the Mango Palace on the return trip. The *Dalbergia* trees are from two different species that produce red wood called rosewood used to make expensive furniture. Many *Dalbergia* species in Madagascar are highly endangered because of illegal logging. We will grow the trees, propagate them by cuttings or grafting, then use the trees produced to promote the preservation of Madagascar's endangered biodiversity by growing them at churches, schools, and other public spaces.

One of the decisions taken at the Synoda Lehibe was for the FJKM to take a more active role in protecting the environment and for all FJKM churches to become “green churches”. The FVEE has been invited to contribute to the planning of the green churches endeavor, so I expect that the FVEE will be providing a lot more native trees and fruit trees for planting at churches over the next four years.



Dwarf coconut trees at the Soavoanio coconut nursery near Sambava



Dalbergia maritima at a local nursery in Sambava

Sambava was Rolland’s first stop on his 3-stop trip to northern Madagascar. After the Synoda Lehibe he met up with Germain Andrianaivoson at Ambilobe; they then went to Antsiranana in the far north to lead a training on growing and grafting fruit trees and to explore possibilities for further collaboration with the FJKM church there (see Update: Exploring Collaboration in the Far North). On the way back they went to Mandritsara to lead another fruit training and to assist further development of the new tree nursery at the FJKM seminary there (see Update: Training and Nursery Progress at Mandritsara). After leaving Mandritsara on 26 August, Rolland and Germain stopped off again at the Mango Palace to repair the water system, finally arriving home safely to Antananarivo on 28 August. We are all grateful to God for their safe travels, for all that was accomplished, and for the exciting and challenging work planned for the months and years ahead.



Germinating dwarf coconut trees from Sambava at the Mango Palace for planting up, 28 August 2021