

December 1, 2023

Dear Friends

One of the blessings of faithful friendships that transcend artificial national or cultural boundaries is the way that they help us to see God's world with new eyes, enabling us to gain fresh perspectives on our own society, culture, and practices.

I was reminded of this many times during my recent visit to our partners in the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar, known by its Malagasy acronym, FJKM.

The Sunday after my arrival, I attended worship at the beautiful chapel on the campus of Ivato Theological Seminary, one of five FJKM seminaries in Madagascar. I was greeted warmly by two of the theological students, Njaka and Fanoela, who kindly helped me by translating the Malagasy liturgy into English.



*Selfies are not my forte! With my gracious hosts, seminary students Fanoela (l.) and Njaka (r.), and Pastor Rasolofojaona Lala (back).*

Worshiping in the FJKM often provides opportunities to engage with scriptural passages that I don't often hear in PC(USA) congregations or other churches that follow the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary.

The FJKM has a committee that develops its own pericope each year, often including texts that do not form part of the Revised Common Lectionary.

That Sunday morning, one of the scripture lessons was just such a text from the single chapter of Obadiah. It read in part: "But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress. ... For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head." [Obadiah, v. 12 & 15]

This passage, with its echoes of Matthew 25 ("Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."), struck me as particularly appropriate in a week when Madagascar was scheduled to go to the polls for a presidential election. Ten of the thirteen candidates had called on their supporters to boycott the election in protest of perceived manipulation of the process by the incumbent government, including the use of security forces to suppress free speech and public demonstrations. The Council of Christian Churches in Madagascar joined with the President of the National Assembly to call for voting to be postponed until flaws could be addressed. The election seemed to have polarised Malagasy society as thoroughly as recent US elections have divided the American public, creating real possibilities for "gloating" by one faction over the distress of another.



*Mme. Josiane Randrianaivoarisoa  
of the FJKM President's staff*

Later that day, as I rode with Mme. Josiane Randrianaivoarisoa, the FJKM President's assistant, past the ubiquitous rice fields with their vibrant green spring growth, Mme. Josiane looked out at the landscape and chuckled, recalling her first trip to Europe. She said that as her plane approached London's Heathrow Airport, she had looked out of the window at the patchwork of green fields. She was overtaken by a wave of excitement that she could not help sharing with the passenger sitting next to her. "How wonderful" she exclaimed "I'll feel right at home with all of these rice fields!" Her puzzled neighbour explained that the green fields were not rice, but grass thriving in Britain's soggy climes. Mme. Josiane realised that she had jumped to a conclusion based on her own experience, without checking her assumptions with those more familiar with the locale. I laughed and said I thought that was a common problem in many places. How often do we encounter a situation that seems problematic and immediately want to find a way to "fix" it? Do we take the time to discern how the people most directly affected understand the situation,

the reasons for it and its implications? It can take a long time before we begin to be able to see with the eyes of others.

In this season of Advent, we give thanks anew that God loves us so much, that God was prepared to assume human form and live amongst us, sharing in our experiences. As we prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of the Christ, let us consider how we, too, can see the world from the perspectives of others, setting aside our own expectations and assumptions to act in Christian solidarity with our neighbours near and far.



*Rice fields are everywhere in and around Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo*

Please continue to pray for justice, peace and democracy for the people of Madagascar. The

presidential election was conducted peacefully on November 16<sup>th</sup>, but the underlying concerns about the credibility of the electoral process have prompted eleven of the candidates to contest the official outcome published by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). CENI gave an overwhelming majority to the incumbent president, despite independent observers' reports of historically low voter turnout, suggesting voters heeded the opposition's calls for boycott. The Council of Churches has been meeting to consider how it can help to chart a path toward national reconciliation and unity that also grapples with the fundamental concerns about democratic expression.

As we approach the end of another year, I am as grateful as ever to each of you for your participation in God's mission through your engagement with World Mission and your prayers and support for our global partners and the ministries of PC(USA) mission co-workers like me. I expect to be in the United States during the second quarter of 2024 to visit congregations and share more of what God is doing through the PC(USA) and our global partners. Please let me know if you would like to invite me to visit.

May the joy and hope of Christ's birth abide with you throughout the year to come!

Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Doug". The letter 'D' is large and loops around the start of the name. The 'o' and 'u' are connected, and the 'g' has a long, sweeping tail that loops back under the 'u'.