

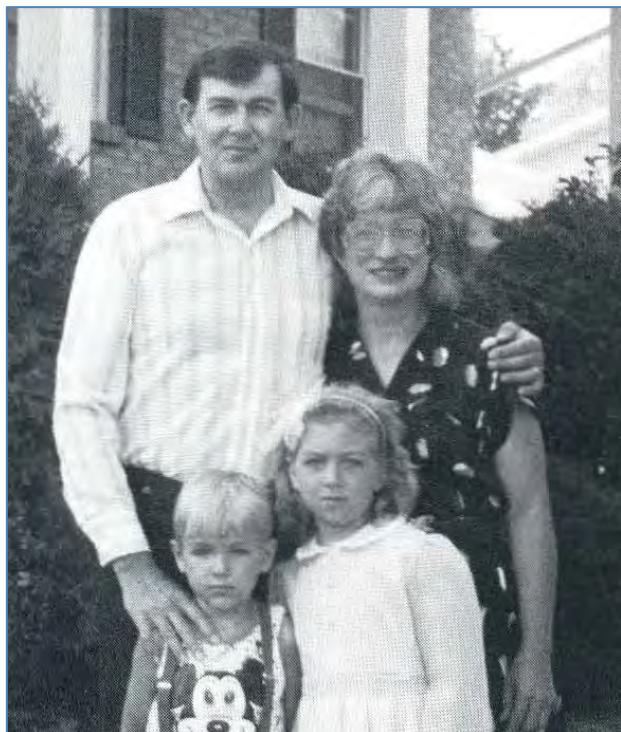
## Going So Far Away to Feel So Much at Home, Diary from Central African Republic

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*Joy is living in her husband John's hometown and has been doing social work there for the past two years - they have two children*

Sometimes the most challenging assignment is a known danger. For former foreign missionaries who encountered debilitating illness or other life-changing difficulties in their mission countries, the International Exchange Program poses a different kind of experience than for those who have never worked overseas. Joy was a missionary to Mexico in 1975, and as she says, this African assignment gave her a special chance for healing. She sent a copy of her diary from this time to her father and he in turn sent a tape recounting his experiences in South America on assignment for his church helping refugees during World War II - a new opening in hometown understanding came through the International Exchange Program.

When True Parents sent out missionaries in 1975, I had hoped to go to Africa but was sent to Mexico instead. Now our family is assigned to the Central African Republic for the international exchange program. Central Africa is so far from my husband's hometown, near Syracuse in central New York, not just in miles but in consciousness. John and I have children,

a home, commitments, and work. Could I go off so far away, and risk strange tropical diseases? Where is that former spirit of adventure? It was my destiny to go, but on this hot day in August 1991, I had to draw upon all my energy, finances, and spiritual resources just to board the plane.

I became enchanted with the French language in high school and majored in French literature in college, but I never had the money to travel to a French-speaking country and never became fluent in French. In church, I never had the chance to go to Europe.

Only God could inspire the sacrifice of passing through Paris, the city of my youthful dreams, without stopping. As it turned out, my bags did not arrive in Paris on my flight, and Air France had my ticket to Africa changed to the following day. I had the chance to walk the streets of Paris until I could no longer lift one foot in front of the other. Truly, God's lovingkindness fulfills and surpasses our dreams.

Since I missed my scheduled flight, I arrived in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, a day late. With no way to communicate the change in travel plans, I inquired how to get to the village where our members live on the outskirts of the capital. I was told the name of the village over the phone, but at the airport, I discovered that no village corresponds to that pronunciation. Some people I met with a van took me to the American evangelical missionaries. They received me graciously but wondered why anyone would travel so far without an exact destination. (Even if I knew the correct name of the village, it has no streets aside from the main road, much less house numbers.)

A theology professor who shared the guest house grilled me: What do I believe about Jesus, and do I think Rev. Moon is the Messiah? I attempted some answers and then played with their baby while he and his wife ate supper. Afterwards, I started to do dishes. The theology professor insisted that I stop, explaining that Africans are employed to take care of the house, and if someone does their work they feel that their livelihood is threatened. He said this system bothers him, but he and his wife seem obligated to provide jobs for local people. True Parents have taught us that restoration of any new level must always begin from the servant of servant's position, but my service was not acceptable. I tossed and turned throughout the tropical night.

### **New center in the capital**

In the light of the new day, I walked downtown and discovered government buildings that corresponded to the telex number I had been given. I found the home church leader who works there, and he arranged a

ride to the village. I met several center members and the national leader, Lenga, who greeted me with warmth and intensity. He explained how pressure from the French government and jealousy of American missionaries nearly ten years ago caused the shutdown of a large project, FARMAP, that would have provided agricultural and technical education, as well as moral guidance, to the young people of Central Africa and neighboring countries. Our church was disbanded, equipment was confiscated, and all foreign members were expelled. In the confusion that followed, many local members lost contact with the church or just became discouraged. From Zongo, the Zairian village across the river from Bangui, international contact was maintained. In desperate economic straits, the government has been unable to pay many of its workers, resulting in strikes and riots. In such an environment, fundraising and business activities generate little income. European missionaries have been assigned but have been unable to obtain long-term visas. An early member from Zaire, Lenga, was sent last year to try to rebuild a foundation in this isolated country.

"Your arrival is concrete testimony to our members that we are not forgotten," he said.

I thought I had gone through difficulties preparing to come, but nothing compared to theirs. When Lenga asked why I was staying only twenty-one days, I explained simply that I came to offer what I could (to stay longer now, I would have to quit my job before completing a two-year commitment). Lenga reported having dreams that if they could get a center in the capital, it would be a new beginning for the movement and even the country. They had found a promising house, but the rent was more than triple what they were paying in the village and they had no funds. Listening to their situation, I decided to give all the money I brought and asked for nothing for myself. (Had I gone totally crazy, giving all my money to a central figure?)

I had left behind my familiar roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. Here there was no mask to hide behind, no telephone to distract me, no children demanding mommy's attention. Life was simpler; if I didn't know what to do, I could always pray, clean, sing—even all at the same time. Here each day I could do a lot more of all three than I had been accustomed to doing for years. In the process, I could examine what I am investing for my spiritual growth and what I am contributing to the restoration of the world.



*Joy Pople shelling squash seeds with the village children*

### **Communities of families**

Since my husband and I share a vision of building communities of blessed families, I asked to meet some of the families that are part of the extensive home-church network. One evening we visited Papa Tomas and his family, who greeted us with slight bows and outstretched hands. We were ushered into an immaculate living room, with a small table set up as an altar. Behind the couch was a large blackboard with an outline of a Principle lecture.

I asked them what had attracted them to the Unification Church, and where they found the greatest difficulty. The wife had been contacted first. Her husband, a Catholic, did not want to hear anything new. But bit by bit the members visiting their home caught his interest and he began to study the Principle. His many questions severely tried the patience of our members. When he finally became convinced of the significance of the Principle and True Parents, he outstripped his wife in devotion. Much to her

consternation, he quit his job and for three years devoted himself to helping out on the church's farm and other projects. I was amazed. How did they and their three children survive financially? How did they eat? The wife's answer choked in her throat and came out as tears.

Their oldest child, age seven, has missed a whole year of school, due to the strikes. Yet she knows how to read and can figure out complex words. She was called in to demonstrate her ability, and she sat quietly between her parents for some time. The parents explained that they and their children rise at four in the morning each day for prayer and study.

Then Papa Tomas had two questions for me: How does the American Unification Church guide couples like them, and what was the major spiritual difference in my life before and after receiving the Blessing? Their sincere desire is to make conditions to receive the Blessing, but they find it very difficult. His pointed questions required thoughtful responses, and like his wife, I too found myself choking on memories.

Each day I learned more about why I had come. I returned to the United States after four years in Mexico with unresolved regrets and pain. To come to Africa offered a chance for healing. Perhaps there can be some restoration if I as a white American, a former missionary, try to unconditionally follow and serve Africans. I had a long conversation with Lenga about issues raised by Papa Tomas, and I could finally sleep at night. However, the constant thirst never left. (Was my longing for true love greater than my thirst for fruit juice?)

Ten days after I arrived, we moved to a new center in Bangui. We cleaned in preparation. I saw one brother washing down an armoire using water that appeared like thick mud. I tried to tell him he should get fresh water, but his face looked blank. I called Lenga and protested that to clean this way only made things dirtier.

Lenga transmitted my suggestion, but as I listened to myself, I heard a critical tone, and I bit my lip. I did not come here to criticize, a voice inside me said. Excusing myself, I got a scrub brush to work on the kitchen and then the bathroom. Through hard work and sweat, I tried to shake off Satan's invasion, but I kept feeling chastised spiritually.

### **Exile and return**

While cleaning, Bible stories giving examples of how people recognize their sins came to my mind. For some reason, during these twenty-one days, it appeared that I had to make a condition of following absolutely, without criticizing or complaining. The moment I stepped or spoke out of turn, I was stopped short by some spiritual force and compelled to repent of my sin.

I was asked to give morning service each day, and I struggled to express my heart in French. The next morning I recounted five Bible stories of how people had come to recognize their sin, starting with Joshua, who learned that someone had sinned after an expedition failed (Joshua 7). In the time of the Judges, the Israelites became aware of their sin only after suffering repeated enemy invasions. King David recognized his sin of adultery only after being visited by a prophet who told him a symbolic story (II Samuel 12). The prodigal son came to his senses after comparing his current low position with his former position as an honored son (Luke 15). Zaccheus recognized his sins during a visit to his home by the sinless Messiah (Luke 19). Then I described what I had experienced the day before and made a public apology to the brother I criticized.

I had not come to Africa to try to escape personal difficulties, but if I had it would have been fruitless. On my first night in the country, the theology professor grilled me about my belief in Jesus, a source of pain throughout my twenty-one years in the church. The way I had initially been taught the Principle seemed an attack on traditional Christian beliefs. The entirety of the Principle was so overwhelming in its power, that after fighting it as long as I could, I had to surrender to evidence that this was where God was directing me. However, I felt that I had to give up my love for Jesus in favor of True Parents; in 1970, members in America knew very little about True Parents. Furthermore, there were few members from evangelical churches who could understand my struggles coming from a Mennonite heritage. Four years later, Rev. Ken Sudo began teaching the Mission of Jesus lectures from a standpoint that I could relate to more easily, but many gaps remained.

Several years ago, I was instructed in prayer to study the Old Testament history from Joshua to Jesus, even to the point of experiencing these providential periods in my own life, as my own foundation to receive the Messiah. I experienced the trials of each providential period, up through the Divided Kingdom. However, I had held back, afraid of the next period, Exile. Now that I was in Africa, I realized that this international witnessing condition, going to a country not of our own choosing, is like a voluntary exile. (After Jesus' crucifixion, the Jewish people were involuntarily dispersed throughout the world; I feel our calling is to go voluntarily to repent for America's imprisonment of the Messiah). I had overcome many obstacles even to arrive in Africa, with no idea what to expect. God had so many



blessings waiting for me here. This twenty-one-day period could represent two hundred and ten years of Exile and Return. What remained was only the final period of Preparation for the Messiah.

### **Christian foundation**

The Zairian members I met and most of the Central African members have a deep Christian heritage. I had come so far to feel so uniquely at home spiritually. After twenty-one years in the Unification Church, I resolved to offer this twenty-one-day condition for a new beginning. One morning at breakfast, I talked about my conflicting emotions regarding Jesus and how ashamed I felt, after twenty-one years, to keep stumbling over the same points. I asked Lenga if he had some guidance on this, and after some silence, he gave a vague reply about needing to follow the order of the Principle.

A seven-day workshop was in progress, and the day's lectures were the Mission of the Messiah and Christology. Afterward, I went to the sisters' room to pray. I began to realize more deeply the meaning of the Principle's teaching about salvation. At age fourteen I experienced Jesus saving me from fear and opening the way for me to experience God through nature. That was truly a rebirth. Four years later, through charismatic prayer groups I began to learn the basics of the life of faith: prayer, witnessing, fasting, creating a community of faith. But an assault in unexpected circumstances cut off the special closeness I had been experiencing with Jesus.

In the past, each time I came across the Principle phrase "the limit of salvation by the cross," I would cringe. Finally, in prayer, I could now clearly see and accept that limit.

When I heard the Principle at age twenty-three, what struck me most deeply was the explanation for the human fall and how Satan destroyed God's ideal by misuse of love. The Principle offers a clear standard for living a pure life, and it taught me the basics of how to make offerings that God can accept and how to recreate my heart through uniting with an Abel figure. I experienced a rebirth through the Blessing ceremonies, enabling God to begin to claim me as his daughter. True Parents saved me from an isolated way of life, stimulated me to develop the heart of a daughter, sister, wife, and mother, and pushed me to become a substantial offering on a worldwide level. Thus, True Parents are bringing me substantial salvation, both spiritual and physical, on the foundation of spiritual salvation through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and I can be grateful to each one who played a part in opening the way for me to return to God.

At breakfast the following day, I reported what I had learned in prayer and, since trying to hide problems seemed useless, I went ahead and confessed that the greatest dilemma I faced in this international witnessing condition was my lack of motivation to witness. In Mexico, even during the most difficult times of disunity, we always witnessed and taught the Principle. However, when I returned to the United States in 1979 to recover from hepatitis and join my husband, I found the situation of our movement very confusing. For years I focused on educating and caring for church members rather than trying to bring in new people. This loss of heart for witnessing has been a source of shame.

### **Witnessing anew**

After the morning lecture, I walked to the cathedral to pray. I needed to confront what was keeping me from witnessing and make a new determination.

Not many days remained before I had to leave, and within me welled the desire to find somebody who could understand the preciousness of the Principle and work to restore the nation. In the afternoon Lenga had to do errands, so I offered to accompany him. In a store downtown, a young man asked who I was, and we talked. He was a university student interested in studying the Bible. After the morning's confession, I could see God intervening in a different way, through the unity between Lenga and me.

In almost every talk to the members, Lenga constantly emphasized the privilege we have of living at this time, making it easy to sustain a grateful heart. Can I do it in the United States?

My husband asked me to keep a diary during my trip and my inspiration is that through this my relatives can understand something of my heart and the heart of our movement. Thus, I have found through this international witnessing condition a catalyst for tribal messiahship.

I stopped to say goodbye to the missionaries who gave their hospitality my first night in Africa and they asked my impressions from my visit. I had met God in a deeper way. I came to the Central African Republic to give, but my conclusion was that I had received spiritually far more than I had given. With smiles, they replied that everyone who stays with them gives the same report.