



‘Aiki! Aiki! Aiki!’

VIEWS FROM A WORKCAMP IN NIGERIA

Dana McNeil

by Peggy Gish and Dana McNeil

OUT OF THE CRISIS, REBUILDING AND RENEWAL

Aiki! Aik! Aiki!” men called out from time to time. “Work! work! work!” in the Hausa language. Under a hot sun, a continuous line of men carried cement blocks up a wooden ramp, with nailed-on rungs, to the second floor of a new office building for the staff of Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria). The building is part of the EYN church headquarters in

Kwarhi, Adamawa State. On the second floor, groups of men mixed up mortar, and laid block to form the walls and doorways of the new building.

This was the first week of a two-week workcamp from Aug. 17 to Sept. 3, co-sponsored by EYN and the Church of the Brethren. About 17 to 20 Nigerian men came each week, from various EYN churches, to help with the building. Three of us represented the Church of the Brethren in the US, and were welcomed warmly: Jon Ogburn, Dana McNeil, and Peggy Gish.

The construction of the building was started in 2014, before Boko Haram looted and damaged the EYN

headquarters. The EYN staff and other people from the area fled, and EYN temporarily based its headquarters in the city of Jos in central Nigeria, and the construction stopped. This was the second workcamp to work on the building since the EYN staff returned to Kwarhi in 2016.

When asked why they came to the workcamp, the Nigerian men, who had taken time off from their jobs at home, gave answers such as the following: “This is a way I can serve God.” “When people drive by, I want them to see a church whose headquarters show the dedication and support of its people.” “After Boko Haram’s attempt to destroy



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Peggy Gish

the church, we want to rebuild and make it strong.”

The camaraderie and festive mood of the group attracted a number of boys and girls—children of EYN staff and others living nearby—who joined in the work. They filled metal dishpans with sand and carried them up to the second floor to be mixed with concrete. Two of the older boys proudly found that they could carry half blocks on their heads or shoulders. There were moments when the children, and sometimes adults, erupted into play. Suddenly the children would be flying paper airplanes around the site or playing impromptu games.

As the workcamp went on, there were more playful moments among the men—joking around, working to music, or tossing plastic water bags that burst. During a break, young men spontaneously formed a percussion band and sang together. Another time, the Hausa words to the hymns “Holy, Holy, Holy” or “Count Your Blessings” could be heard through the building.

Long after the workcamp partici-

pants are back home again, we expect the impact of this work to continue. It will extend farther than the almost 5,000 cement blocks that were trucked in and mortared in place. Forged together in these two weeks were ongoing friendships across tribes and cultures, increased dedication to the church, and joy at serving the church. The work will not only strengthen EYN as a church, but stand as a symbol of hope—as out of the crisis EYN rebuilds and is renewed. —Peggy Gish

HOW DOES ONE MEASURE THE BLESSINGS OF GOD?

Coming home from a trip where I saw so many new things, I realized it wasn’t about sightseeing. I worked on a building project, but it wasn’t really about buildings. I attempted to bring love and encouragement, but I felt like

I gave so little and received so much.

How does one measure, reflect on, or understand the blessings of God? How does one reflect on, understand, and put into words the experiences of



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life that cannot be put into words, but must be felt to be understood?

My heart still breaks for what the people of northeast Nigeria have had to endure under the constant threat of Boko Haram, but my heart sees with different eyes now. Yes, these folk have gone through a great deal of suffering, but they are not despondent. They are filled with hope, trust in God, zeal to share Jesus, and the energy and the determination to follow Jesus into a better future for their children, their communities, and their nation. They are committed to seeing these struggles in the light of opportunity that will reveal the glory of God in their midst.

We worshiped with our brothers and sisters at the EYN Giima Church in the city of Mubi. What a joy-filled time of worship and celebration of what God is doing among them. This congregation was worshipping in a shelter because their church building was destroyed in

the Boko Haram attack on Mubi. The only part of the original church still standing was the high tower, with a cross that can be seen from across the town—a testimony that the light of Christ is still shining in this place and will not be overcome by the darkness.

A pastor of a church in Uba that had been destroyed by Boko Haram helped

us understand how the congregation is seeing the blessing of God in the midst of struggles. He told us that the people are connecting in a way that they never had before to the stories of the Old Testament. He expressed how they are living these Old Testament stories, and understanding what it is like to completely depend on God. I saw the light shining in the darkness when I visited and worshiped with these people.

I am inspired by two statements that I heard at the workcamp, from a pastor named Papa, and from one of the senior carpenters named Jacob. Jacob told us that we were building something that would last not for a decade or two, but for a hundred years as a testimony of our faith to those who seek to kill and destroy. Our work would ultimately give hope to many future generations of Christians. What an inspiration to see our calling to serve, every day, as a testimony that will last past these few moments to shine the light of Christ for all of eternity. It reminded me of the faith described in Hebrews 11, where the faithful lived into the truth of God's promises as if they had already been revealed, even though they had not yet seen them come to fruition.

Papa's statement came on the last day of the workcamp. He called us to work as if this was the last day we ever had to work for Jesus. What an idea, what an awesome responsibility, and what an amazing privilege. Every con-

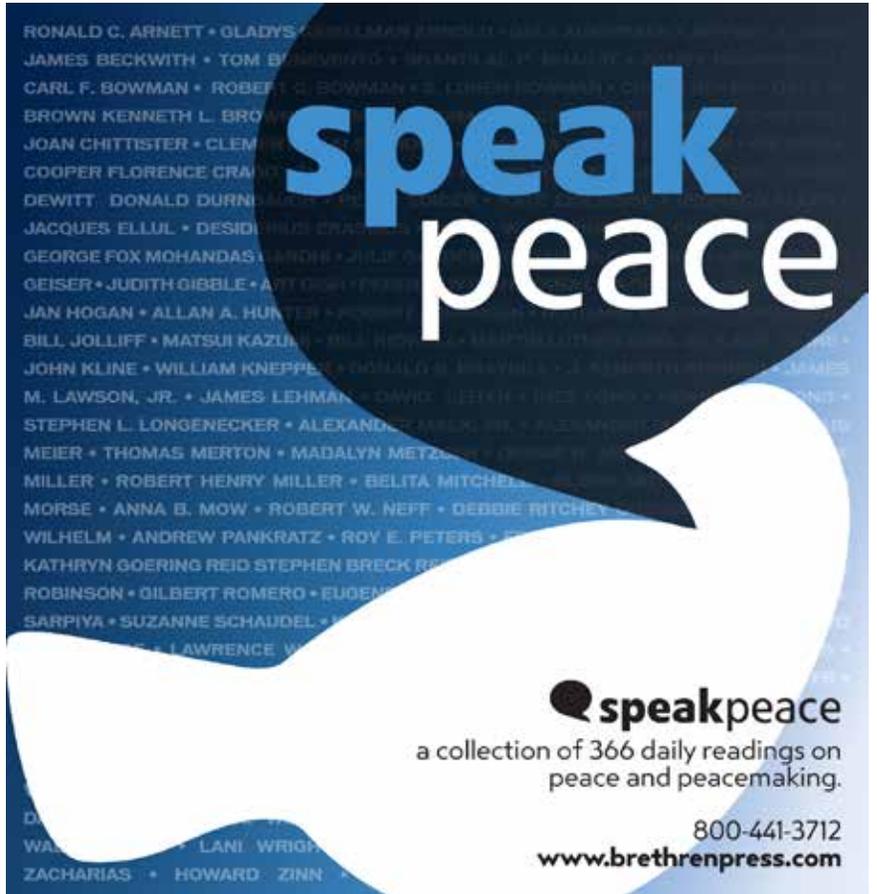


crete block we carried, we carried for Jesus. Every shovel full of sand was for Jesus. Every person we encouraged, we did for Jesus. What a concept of living for Jesus—taking every ordinary moment of our lives and making it a moment of worship, a moment of devotion to our savior, a moment of testimony to his glory.

These Nigerian brothers and sisters in Christ inspire me to see everything as an opportunity to grow in my walk with Jesus, and give my best for his glory. They inspire me to live beyond myself for a future that I may never witness. How do they inspire you?

—Dana McNeil 

A series of Nigeria workcamps are rebuilding churches and other EYN structures that have been destroyed in the insurgent violence in northeast Nigeria. The next Nigeria workcamp is scheduled for January 2018. To participate in a Nigeria workcamp, contact Kendra Harbeck in the Global Mission and Service Office, at kharbeck@brethren.org. For more about the Nigeria Crisis Response of the Church of the Brethren and EYN, go to www.brethren.org/nigeriacrisis.

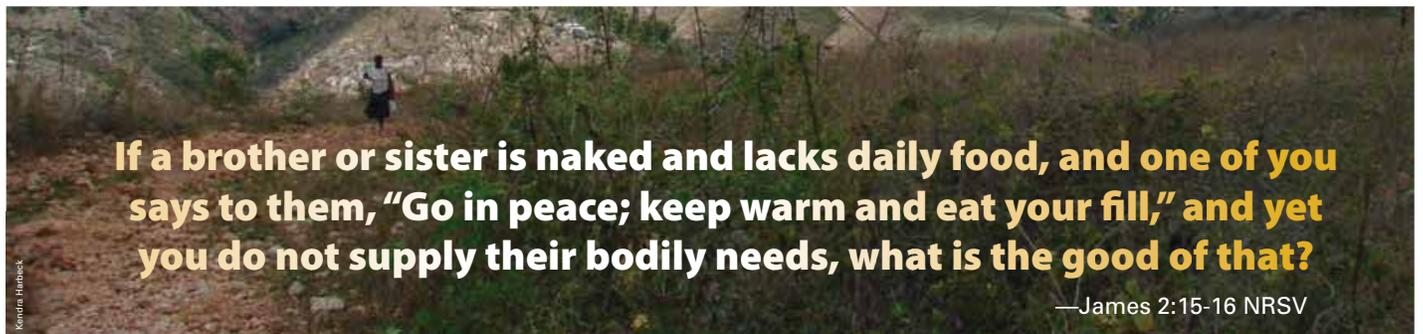


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If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

—James 2:15-16 NRSV

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