

## *In the Shadow* Electricity and Telephones

Because we live in the village of Buhuru, which is on the outskirts of the decent sized town of Gisenyi, the electrical service is fairly dependable. It will occasionally go off for an hour or so, particularly when there are storms, but coming here as an American with the mindset that Africa is underdeveloped, I expected we would have frequent power outages. Another preconceived notion out the window!

Telephone service is even better yet. Over the several years that I have visited here, I have made the remark that I get better cellphone service in central Africa than I do in central Pennsylvania. While that might be a slight exaggeration, the mobile telephone network in Africa is one of the great stories of recent development. Essentially, the landline era never happened in these parts and they jumped right into the digital age. I never cease to be amazed at the level of cellphone use throughout the continent. A mother with a baby on her back, a basket of fruit on her head, and a cellphone at her ear. A day worker on his way to the farm with a hoe in one hand and a phone in the other. It seems that virtually everyone has a cellphone. Even Papa Timo's 95 year old mother has one.

Most of the time it will be a simple basic phone. One can be bought for \$10 or less. The old 2g and 3g phones that won't work in the US anymore are fine here. Airtime is purchased in increments of \$1. When you're living on a couple of bucks a day, you don't want to be locked into a contract that will take all your income. The poorest of folks can't afford a phone, but I am in awe of how many phones I see in people's hands as they walk down the road.



My musings may or may not reflect reality, but my thought is that phones here play a part in maintaining community. It is the way everyone stays connected. Grace and I have noticed that most calls are quick, often little more than "Hello, how are you?" Just a brief exchange to make sure each other is okay. A reminder of the meeting time. Do I need to pick up something on the way home. Not a bad thing at all!

Internet tends to be slower than what we are accustomed to in the US – some areas actually have 4g, though mostly it's 3g, and 2g is all that many people have. At Papa Timo's house the WiFi is 3g, which is entirely satisfactory as far as I'm concerned. It can handle emails, web surfing, WhatsApp calls and Zoom meetings. What more do I need?

Airtime and data can be bought almost anywhere along the road. Vendors sit under umbrellas or small kiosks. There are brick and mortar stores as well that sell phones, sim cards, etc., but most of the day to day transactions happen on the street. This past Sunday, Pastor Patrick and I were driving back to Gisenyi from one of the rural churches that we had preached at. He had just run out of airtime, so we stopped in a village and he was able to buy what he needed. I'm sure that some of the better-off people have phone plans with unlimited talk/text/data, but no one that I'm aware of. When your airtime or data runs out, you stop and buy some more. If you don't have the money today, well, you will just have to do without until it is available. Or borrow a friend's phone – Patrick used mine for a call before we stopped to buy his airtime. It's all very simple, but not like our American set-up with online auto-pay and seamless service. Nor is there a government program to ensure that low income families are covered.

Likewise, the electrical service is set up on a pay-as-you-go basis. You buy a set amount of electricity, say, the equivalent of \$30, plug the numbers into the electric meter on the side of the house and use it until it stops. At that time you can use a mobile phone account or visit one of the street side airtime vendors and buy some more. To us Westerners it seems kind of

clunky, but that's the way it's done and no one seems to have a problem with it. The average Rwandan (if he/she has electric at all) has a few lights and several electrical outlets in the house. Their phones can be charged and they can watch TV (assuming they have one). There are very few refrigerators, electric stoves, water heaters, microwaves. No one has air conditioning. If the power is off for a few hours, or even a few days for that matter, it isn't a major crisis.

Recently I was hanging out during nursery school time as Grace was teaching. Mama Francine came into the school room and told David (the head teacher) that the electric had run out. We hadn't noticed since the school doesn't require any. The construction workers at the new church building had some power tools they couldn't use. She walked down the street to the local airtime vendor and came back a little later with a scrap of paper that had some numbers scrawled on it. David and I went out to the meter on the church wall. He climbed up onto the window sill and I read the numbers to him as he punched them in.

For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Rwanda.

