

## *In the Shadow – Clothing*

It's not as if we Americans are paragons of innocence and modesty. But it is somewhat of a cultural hurdle to get over recognizing Africans dress differently and are less concerned with public displays of some activities than Americans.

As a father of three boys – and having reared them on an isolated farm – it was nothing for one of them to stand out in the open, pull down his pants and pee. Thankfully, as they grew older, we were able to teach them more discreet ways of accomplishing the task. Like my country raised sons, the small boys here aren't shy about "taking a leak." The little fellas at our nursery school are quick to take care of business once they get outside the schoolroom door and into the churchyard.

Deloris, as the mother of those three boys and having a daughter as well, breastfed each of them. She is a modest individual to begin with, so she was always careful about feeding the children in church or any sort of public place. She quickly learned which types of clothing best allowed her to do it without a grand display.

I knew before coming to Africa that public breastfeeding was common, so I wasn't particularly surprised that the women were less concerned with having others see them feed their babies. At first though, it was a slight distraction when a mother would be sitting in the front row while I was preaching. I wasn't bothered or offended, I just wasn't accustomed to it. Like Deloris, they will wear clothing that helps facilitate the task. Though the older women almost exclusively wear traditional clothing that consists of brightly colored fabric (when it's new), the younger women and teens are often seen in short skirts, slacks or leggings, but even then, it is common for skirt-like wraps to be used. Babies are held on their mother's back by a large piece of fabric wrapped around them. I love seeing the little feet sticking out on either side.

I do need to say that none of these folks are "naked savages." In my observation they dress, for the most part, more modestly than most Westerners. As mentioned, many of the



younger women wear slacks, but few wear shorts. Sometimes working men will be shirtless, but it's not common. The older farm men are often seen with an old sport coat and a hat. They prefer button-down shirts and long sleeves. It reminds me of the stories my father told about his grandfather. Walking along with a cane, I think it makes them look very distinguished and dignified. Young men/boys prefer jeans or trousers that are slim fitting over the legs. T-shirts are worn a lot. They're cheap, readily available and easy to wash. I guess it's my age – I prefer the old farmer look. Children will wear any sort of combination of shirts, pants, skirts, etc. The students at the

Brethren Nursery School have uniforms consisting of a yellow polo shirt with blue shorts. They look sharp.

Another thing I want to mention is that there are stereotypes of Africa's climate. Many think that the weather here is either that of a hot steamy jungle or a blistering dry desert. Rwanda, at least here in the northwest region, is neither. Temps range from highs in the mid to upper 20's (upper 80's Fahrenheit) down to the about 15 (60 F) at night. Here along Lake Kivu the climate is incredibly beautiful. I think that the Garden of Eden was somewhere near here. I have no way to verify that biblically or scientifically, just a somewhat joking guess.

On two recent two Sundays I preached at churches in the mountains, Kora and Humure. It was in the mid teens both days. Since the buildings are simple mud-brick with cement floors, open windows and doors, it felt downright chilly. Everyone was wearing sweaters, coats, shawls, hoods, etc. Maybe that's one of the reasons worship here is so lively. It gets you on your feet to jump and dance.



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