News

A service call to Mkar

Participants in the "Faith and Computer Technology" seminar held at the University of Mkar.

Derek Schuurman

MKAR, Nigeria – For many years Redeemer University College students have enthusiastically raised funds for the University of Mkar (formerly called "Hilltop University"). Redeemer students hold an annual auction called "Hobbies for Hilltop" where students auction all manner of goods and services to raise funds for this small Christian university in Nigeria. In the past, they have also organized a more folically-focused fundraiser called "Hairless for Hilltop." Frequent *CC* contributor Al Wolters once graciously lost his longstanding whiskers to raise some substantial funds for this very cause. But this year, rather than just sending a cheque, Redeemer sent some people to Mkar. The trip was a wonderful privilege for us to meet people at the University of Mkar and to build additional bridges between our institutions. The focus of the trip was to assist them to repair and update their ailing computer labs and to provide some relevant workshops and seminars.

The University of Mkar is located in a small rural town in south-central Nigeria about five hours drive "down bush" from Jos. The university is run by the NKST church (the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv) which is located in an area largely populated by people of the Tiv tribe. The NKST church, together with other Reformed churches in Nigeria, vastly outnumber the membership in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. I found it amazing that so many Reformed churches and Christian schools and even a Reformed Christian university have emerged in the short time since pioneering missionaries such as Johanna Veenstra arrived in the 1920s. Like the yams that grow abundantly in this area, God has also allowed the seed of the word to fall on fertile soil and produce a large harvest.

Tiv piety and hospitality

On Pentecost Sunday we had the opportunity to attend a Tiv language service at a large NKST church. Although we did not understand the language, the service was beautiful. It was also long – roughly three hours – something to which we were not accustomed. Singing with Tiv words printed in a song book, I did my best to sing along and sound out the words. At one point, a lady stood up and recited the Pentecost story (in Acts 2) from memory. Later, members of the choir came walking down the aisles simultaneously singing different songs with candles perched on their heads to represent Pentecost. Afterward, the minister assured us in English that they are not Pentecostal but still very Reformed. In my mind, no explanation was required; it was a beautiful sight. We also attended some English chapel services where the singing was an interesting mix of what appeared to be more traditional African-style songs alongside hymns from the old blue Psalter Hymnal. Many mornings we woke up to the sound of children at a local school singing hymns and other songs. I was impressed with the piety of the local students as we attended chapel and student services.

Many people that we met were hospitable and gracious, although at times I felt they may have been a little too deferential towards us. Furthermore, it was clear that they were extremely thankful that we came. I must confess that I felt a little isolated at times, and I know my diet was stretched some. I can now add pounded yams and fresh mangoes to my dietary resume. I was thankful for a wise and hospitable Christian widow named Margaret who prepared most of our meals and who helped look after us.

Digital divide

People there face many challenges. In addition to health and economic challenges, there are numerous technical challenges. One of the big challenges that we immediately discovered was electrical power (or the lack thereof). The power is off far more often than it is on, making the use of computers and other electrical devices extremely challenging. In this regard, unreliable power contributes to the so-called "digital divide" (the gap between those with reliable access to digital technology and those without). Computers require the use of a UPS (Un-interruptible Power Supply) along with backup generators. Teaching can also be a challenge. I observed a programming class which was taught in the computer lab with a whiteboard, paper and pencils, since the power was out for much of the class. Many of the computers we worked on were also quite old and in need of repair, several of them suffering from blown power supplies that were likely due to regular power interruptions.

Not only is reliable power a challenge, but so is reliable Internet access. I find it hard to imagine working in post-secondary education and doing research without regular Internet access. In the absence of Internet access, they use an "eGranary" server (see http://www.widernet.org/digitallibrary/) in the library. The eGranary Digital Library is a collection of millions of digital educational resources stored on a large hard drive that can be accessed by patrons on their local area network. This resource was a helpful addition to their modest library collection.

Students gather around a professor demonstrating an updated workstation in the computer lab.

Although Internet access was limited, cell phones were ubiquitous. Almost everyone appeared to have a cell phone, and even in the small rural town where we stayed we observed nearly full-bar reception. Cell phone recharge cards were easily obtained and could be bought from brightly coloured roadside kiosks alongside other vendors selling fresh fruit and yams. Mobile phones are an example of a "leapfrog technology" that has enabled developing nations to bypass the wired phone infrastructure and jump directly into modern mobile communications technology.

Another huge problem we observed was the rapid proliferation of computer viruses which plagued many computers. Since very few people have Internet access, the primary way to transfer files is to use a USB flash drive, and these become the medium through which many viruses propagate. The lack of Internet access also means that people are unable to get regular anti-virus updates. One alternative we provided was to install Linux on many of the machines – Linux is a powerful and free operating system that can run on older hardware and is immune to Windows viruses (I plan to share more about Linux in a future article). I also had the opportunity to offer some technical workshops for some of the students and professors. In the end, there was simply not enough time for us to help with all the computer work that needed to be done at the university and elsewhere.

Faith perspective important

I was also invited to give a talk in chapel, where I gave a message based on the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). After spending time focusing on improving computer labs, I deliberately chose the tower of Babel as a reminder about the place of technology. In addition, I spoke at a one-day seminar on "Faith and Computer Technology." The seminar was well attended with approximately 50 participants from roughly six different schools and universities. Giving the workshop was an honour and a delight; participants appeared genuinely engaged and seemed interested in hearing about how faith can inform areas like computer technology. One participant remarked that he appreciated the seminar and how his view on the connection between faith and technology had changed. In hindsight, I suspect that sharing this perspective was equally (or perhaps more) important than the technical work we accomplished.

While I was there I met a few people and heard of others who had landed in positions of leadership and responsibility after being trained in Christian schools in Nigeria. It seems

From left to right: Derek, Matt West, and Dirk VanderSteen are served a traditional meal of pounded yams and chicken.

that one way to help shape people and nations is to provide solid Christian education. One elderly man spoke passionately to me about the importance of Christian higher education. While pounding his cane on the ground, he declared that "knowledge without integrity is dangerous."

My hope is that the time we spent in Mkar was helpful and fruitful for the university. I encourage *CC* readers to pray for this fledgling Christian university as well as other institutions around the world that seek to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the area of higher education.

Dr. Derek Schuurman (dschuur@cs.redeemer.ca), a professor at Redeemer University College, traveled this past May to the University of Mkar in Nigeria. Accompanied by a recent Redeemer graduate, Matthew West, Derek volunteered to update and repair their computer labs and to offer various workshops. The University of Mkar is a Reformed Christian university located in Benue state, Nigeria.