

An Opening In Madagascar, August 2006

For the last 2 years we've been in regular email contact with three groups of non-trinitarians in Madagascar. We've discussed the doctrines of the Gospel extensively with those of them who have access to email, and some requested baptism. We therefore spent 6 days with these groups, carefully trying to understand what they actually believed and assisting them to better understandings where we could. Madagascar is a Francophone country- very few people, and none of our new brothers or sisters, speak much English. However, whilst most know at least some words in French, the uneducated know only Malagasy. Our contacts had already translated a large amount of our literature into Malagasy- including the 'What is the Gospel?' booklet and much of Bible Basics. You can view it at www.carelinks.net . The material had already been printed in Malagasy and had clearly been studied at length by the groups. One of the groups numbers about 100, and whilst very much in agreement over the non-existence of the trinity, we found ourselves unable to reach agreement on other doctrinal issues.



Photo: Brother Riza offering an English Bible Basics to anyone who spoke English, and also the Malagasy edition, to an audience of about 150 people. We're pleased to say, by the way, that the French edition of Bible Basics has now been reprinted and is available from Bro. Marcus Heaster at bible.basics@onetel.net

The other, smaller groups meet in homes, and we spent many hours patiently going through basic doctrine with them- the nature of God, the Lord Jesus, the promises, the Kingdom, the death state, the devil, hell, the Holy Spirit etc. At times we hired a school classroom for this, at others we spoke in hotel conference rooms. All these talks were given in French with Malagasy translation.



Photo: Giving talks about basic Bible doctrine in French, translated to Malagasy

It was a difficult and lengthy task to assess the real understanding of those who spoke only Malagasy. Towards the end of the week we felt confident in the understanding of 13 people, and it was a pleasure to baptize Brothers: ARMAND, JOSE, HONORE, RIZA, FAIROMEZANE, THOMAS, RADO, LOVA, HOBY and TSIMBA; and sisters LALA, SYLVIA and CLAUDETTE.



Photo: Our first baptisms in Madagascar

We urged our new brothers and sisters to use the Bible Companion reading tables, so that wherever they are in this very large country they can feel spiritually in touch with each other through reading the same chapters, from Diego Suarez in the north to Antananarivo in the centre to Morondova on the West coast.



Photo: The Bible Companion in use by a new brother in Madagascar

We are happy to report that French speaking brothers and sisters in South Africa have shown interest in further visits and care for these new brothers and sisters. We have to comment that these brothers and sisters are living in one of the poorest countries on earth, and generally are towards the bottom end of Malagasy society. Over 60% of the population is under 18, life expectancy is very low, and large numbers of the population live in terrible shanty towns on the edge of the big cities. It is in these awful squatter settlements that the majority of our new brothers and sisters live.



Photo: Typical shanty town on a river embankment on the edge of Antananarivo

People trawl the streets trying to make money, sell things or find work; violent crime, corruption, and daylight robbery / muggings are the order of the day. The poverty cycle is very visible- low income, long working hours and unhealthy work and diet mean that adults can't educate their children and themselves die young, leaving the children to fend for themselves during the day time. They can't afford visits to the doctor [which must all be paid for] let alone to buy any medication prescribed. Free state education doesn't really exist for most children, and education seems left by the Government to the many private schools, the fees of which are well beyond the reach of most people- even though cheap by Western standards [around 300 Euros / year]. With no education, the children grow up on the street, the girls get pregnant in their teens, and the cycle of poverty continues. There are children everywhere. Tragically and disgustingly, prostitution and exploitation of children is apparent everywhere- despite UNICEF posters warning against it in the hotels.



Photo: UNICEF poster warning against child prostitution

Walking the streets of the shanty towns where our new brothers and sisters lived, we were deeply touched by the tragedy of so many small children being just left to fend for themselves, literally laying in the dirt, eating and drinking whatever they can, all with runny noses and dressed in rags, three year olds picking up jagged glass, others, clearly sick and malnourished, just lying there crying.



Photo: Children in the shanty towns

Our sister Claudette is a single mother who has four living children [mortality rates amongst children are terribly high here], and runs a stall in a shanty town. Her three youngest can't go to school as she can't possibly afford it. She can't even find the equivalent of 5 Euros to visit the doctor. Her eldest child has done some grades at school but she can't afford pay school fees for her to continue.



Photo: Sister Claudette in the shanty town

We gave what immediate help we could but these folk are in structural poverty that needs more than cosmetic assistance. They're lovely kids and our sister evidently tries to bring them up in a Godly way, teaching them to read from the Bible whilst she tries to provide for them. She manages to provide them with food, but that's the limit. The fantastic growing climate in Madagascar and plentiful rain means that basic food is abundant and cheap- but there's not much beyond that for the poor masses.



Photo: Three lovely children whose mother can't afford for them to go to school- doomed to be caught up in the poverty cycle of Madagascar shanty towns



Photo: Cindy's instant family, so upset we had to leave

It seems to us that despite all the problems of fairness, of people being attracted to Christ in hope of material benefit from the preachers, the risk that the educated member of the family will be subject to pressures which are spiritually detrimental... despite all these issues, issues which we're fully conscious of, we feel in conclusion that the alternative is unthinkable and even immoral- to just leave the children of brothers and sisters in Christ in this hopeless poverty trap which cycles on and on. We believe that giving a basic education to at least one member of these very poor families is about the only thing, humanly speaking, that will in the long term enable both that child and also the family as a whole to somehow in the long term rise out of the poverty cycle. We're aware of course that there are hundreds of other brothers and sisters in Africa and Pakistan whom we're in touch with whose children face the same prospects. The scale of the problem is huge. However, to simply do nothing is to us unthinkable. We can't agree with any policy position that says 'No- your kids must remain in that poverty cycle, and so must you, just in case we don't appear completely fair, or because a 'rice Christian' mentality might develop in your area'. And so we conclude this report joyful and thrilled that 13 more have been baptized into the Lord's saving Name, but worried more than usual by the burden of these folks' poverty which we feel we must at least attempt to lighten. We believe that this is indeed the spirit of the Lord Jesus whom we seek to understand and emulate. The relief of temporal poverty was admittedly not the primary objective of the Lord Jesus, but it was also something He gave attention to whenever it crossed His path in the course of His teaching of the Gospel [e.g. the feeding of the multitudes]. It is His spirit which we seek to follow.

Please pray for them and us as we try to address all these issues both sensibly and with compassion.

With love from your brothers and sisters of CCM