

David and Heather Sharland

Link Letter no. 68 | February 2021

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The call in action

Dear Friends Far and Near,

This is a tough time of year. The beautiful greens, reds and yellows have dried to a dusty brown, water is a precious commodity and energy is at a premium. And in Uganda it's the election season and COVID is rampant, BUT.....

The other day, when walking to Eden Demonstration Farm, through a dry and crispy valley, where good farming soil is being burned for bricks, thirst and heat assailed my body and thoughtfulness my mind. It's a hard time to take work seriously. The farm was almost deserted. Even the trees seemed sad. But on walking through the farm, expecting nothing good, I noticed a green hedge amid the dun browns. The mulberry bushes were thriving!

On approaching, I noticed that the bushes were covered in ripe, juicy fruit! How could that be? Two months ago we expected no more fruit. Jesus spoke of the vine and the fig; today he showed me the Parable of the Mulberry Bush!

Mulberries were brought to this part of Africa as a host plant for the silkworm, to satisfy the luxury market of Europe in the brutal Belgian colonial period. Grown amid the drudgery of slavery, now this bush is valued for the delicious, sweet fruit it bears. Even when all around is dry and barren, here is plenty! What a picture of Kingdom redemption!

As we entered this new year, we were struck by so many negative messages as people looked back on 2020. Was it really a dead year, a harsh year, a wasted year, or did God teach us to look deeper within ourselves and learn? May we not lose the GOOD lessons God showed us in that tough year!

We have enjoyed joining two or three churches each week through YouTube. How amazing to hear churches finding new ways of being Jesus to their communities in place of self-preservation; to see love blossoming amid sadness and frustration; to see service replacing introversion. Some of us have re-found lost craft skills, our love of productive gardening, and the joys of reading and writing.

And family life has shown its glory! Yes, tensions in confined spaces, frustration, anger and despair leading to abuse and even death, but also a realisation of the value of a biblical view of family, mutual support, appreciation of personalities, seeking the best for the other and the security of the family unit. When curtailed, we see the true value of the familiar!

In our West Nile context, we have seen many cracks in society widening with a reversion to



Name: David and Heather Sharland

Location: Arua, Uganda

Our call: To use our skills in the service of God's people, enabling them to live healthy and fulfilling lives and to know Jesus as their saviour and friend.

Our role: David is using agriculture to serve struggling and marginalised farmers in the name of Creator God; Heather is diocesan health coordinator.



Our dry, brown valley

Continued over the page

traditional spiritual beliefs, selfishness, the fragility of family and the lack of sexual self-control. But we have also seen a wonderful re-valuing of community, of care for the vulnerable and a valuing of the created world. It has been good to see families united in productive farming. There will be no hunger this year, except for the negligent.

Hasn't it been beautiful to see creation taking a deep breath of recovery in both towns and country! Butterflies, clean air, birds, flowers and trees have had a good year!

And for us it has been a good year spent closely with God. We have so enjoyed longer discussions and prayer times over our morning Bible readings, more time to nurture and enjoy our garden, time to carefully encourage friends over cake and coffee, time to think and strategise in place of hectic activity. It's been amazing to see lessons that have been taught but unheeded for a hundred years, adopted within days of COVID advice! Infection, so often seen as a Western concept, has been understood in a new way.

And we have valued this year as a stepping stone towards retirement – or is it re-retirement? To see this as a positive step not a period of loss and uselessness.

Yes, 2022 is to be David's 40th year walking the call with CMS, and is to be our year of retiring. How thankful we are for your faithful company along the way. We've prayed together, cried together and laughed together, and we are so very grateful for your support.

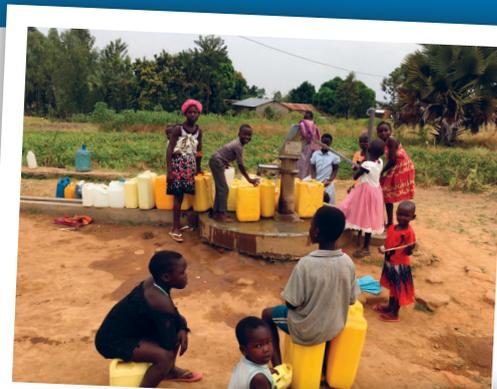
2021 will see our leaving Arua, our peaceful home, our friends and colleagues, our missionary identity, West Nile and Uganda. But our ministry with CMS will not end yet. Please stay with us! We hope to see most of you later in the year. We expect to land in England in June. What new adventures God has for us from May onwards! We are hoping for tyres, not tired!

Back to the Parable of the Mulberry Bush. I gathered about four pounds of fruit, where I expected none! As a less appreciated fruit here, I took it home and we made five pots of jam and some ice cream! So appreciated at this hot time of year! Imagine mulberry jam on Joice's fresh crusty bread!

Was 2020 a wasted year or a year of useful learning we intend to hold onto?

Let's take to heart the Mulberry Bush lessons; productivity in hard circumstances, surprises of grace amid a harsh society, pruning, though hard to take, leads to blessings beyond measure, deep roots nourishing a selfless life of service, leaves set to catch the rays of the Son and the water of the Spirit empowering us invisibly but effectively. May 2021 be a year of fruitfulness from a spiritual health nourished from God's Word and his Spirit within us – whether in West Nile, UK or beyond!

With thankful love from David and Heather



Photos from top to bottom: Water is precious; line of mulberry bushes; mulberry fruit; mulberry jam

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