

Tanzania Sponsor Tour

May 2010



Sponsors with their sponsored children

Introduction

I've been sponsoring a child through Compassion International for several years - I believe it's a great ministry where people can make a real difference in a child's life from halfway around the world. It's not just something where you give money, but it is something far more personal - you get to write letters and send pictures back and forth and develop a relationship. After a few years, it seemed the best thing I could do to enhance that relationship was to actually go and be able to visit and spend a couple weeks in his country.

I had almost gone to Tanzania last year - since my child is one of the older ones (he was 18), I figured he was about to "graduate" from the Compassion program and be on his own, so this might be my last chance to go and visit. I was dismayed to hear the trip was already full and that I might have lost my chance. But it ended up working for the best - soon after hearing the Tanzania trip was full, my choir got invited to go on a tour to Russia for 2 weeks. I wouldn't have been able to do both trips last year! And since the Tanzania trip was quite successful last year they decided to have another one this year.

It turns out that in Tanzania the kids can stay in the program until they are 22 (in some countries it is 18). In fact many of the older kids are the ones that need the most support since if they cannot complete their schooling and are put on the street before they are ready, they end up in a worse state (some end up joining street gangs and get involved in crime and violence).

It was an emotional time during the couple weeks just before the trip, and it seems like the devil had other plans. Issues at work at the last minute, some minor health concerns (I had felt some sickness coming on – even a bit of what felt like a mild case of pneumonia, but luckily it soon passed), and even a billowing ash cloud over a remote Iceland volcano with a name that nobody could pronounce (Eyjafjallajökull) threatened to disrupt plans since several major airports across Europe were shut down. Sometimes it felt hard to feel excited about going with all the uncertainty at the last minute (I was afraid to have something come up to spoil the plan at the last minute), so my emotions stayed a bit guarded. But I realized if God was really in control, then He would make sure everything worked out - I just needed to trust in His goodness.

During our trip we were going to be handing out gifts, such as school supplies, basic hygiene products like toothpaste and shampoo, and sporting supplies like soccer balls and Frisbees. I had planned to spend about \$100 on supplies and donations so I got to go for a short "shopping spree". A half an hour later, my cart was full to the brim and I started to worry if I could get everything into my luggage! But I trusted God that it was going to work out - and then I felt led to make another pass through the hygiene products aisle and pick up more tubes of toothpaste and toothbrushes and some other things. So I went a bit over budget. But I still felt like I could do so much more - it nearly brought me to tears knowing how small of an impact I could make, but how important it would be to the kids I could help. I wanted to be able to get something for everybody, but at least I knew the rest of the group was going to be bringing supplies as well and we were all in it together.

Most people I know who had been to Tanzania had gone just to climb Mt Kilimanjaro or go to the Serengeti on safari or go to Zanzibar to the beach resorts. When most friends asked what I would be doing there, they were surprised to find out that I wouldn't be doing any of those things, but instead I would be visiting my sponsored child. I was actually wondering how much sightseeing we were going to be able to do since most of our trip was ministry focused. I was looking forward to interacting with the local people (many tourists go just to see the sights and check off items from their "bucket list", and miss the connection with the local people).

Our journey

May 1 finally came around and we were all ready to go. We had a sizable group and I was looking forward to meeting everyone. I knew it was a journey we were all going to share. We had 32 participants from all around America:

Amanda Avrett

Bryan & Deloris Selland
Claire & Eliza Conant
Daniel & Erin Bigart
Elaine Bergstrom
Eric & Kathryn Zellner
Janis & Chuck White
Jennifer Konow
Jill Corley
John & Roxanne Romnes
Josh Wheeler
Joyce Mez
Karen Bauder
Kimberly Mallison
Lauren Schmidt
Leroy Leemhuis
Mary Whelan
Matthew Blum
Mayo & Rebecca Kasling
Mia Chang
Michael Wilson
Mike & Terri Mikolaitis
Molly Bower
Nada Mckenna

Luckily the ash cloud dispersed just days before our trip (or so it seemed like "luck" – or was this just proof that God was indeed in control?). Our voyage around the world started with a bit of adventure - they had some trouble connecting me from my Delta flight to KLM at JFK since they couldn't find my flight number. The agent at the desk was new and didn't really understand what happened - she said she thought my flight had been re-booked under a different flight number and they couldn't process my connection. It sounded like I might have to claim & re-check my bags at the busy JFK airport in NY (which would probably cost me an extra \$110, since the first bag is \$25, second is \$35, and I would have to do it twice) - got to love flying! But God was good - they found my flight number under a KLM code share and since it was connecting to an international flight, all my baggage fees were waived!

But we had to deal with some confusion with our gate assignment in our JFK connection (it was B24 but then moved to 51 on opposite sides of the sprawling airport (requiring multiple trips on the long shuttle bus ride across the airport) - I think actually the flight numbers had changed since our flight was "cancelled" then "re-booked" at the same time due to confusion from the ash cloud). Luckily with most folks having cell phones and Kim helping to make sure everyone was straightened out, we all found our way to the right gate. I thought I would have had plenty of time to relax during my 3 hour connection in JFK, but after issues with the gate change, making sure my seats were booked correctly (I didn't have boarding passes all the way through, and after waiting in the line at the gate check-in counter, I realized I left my passport in my bag which was at the gate with all the other people, so I had to go back and wait in line again!), making sure my bags were checked OK (transferring from Delta to KLM - didn't want the bags to get left in NY), and finally scrounging some greasy pizza for dinner, my relaxing 3 hour break was cut to probably less than half an hour.

The Boeing 777 had a myriad of games and other entertainment during the flight, but with so much anticipation on our trip, it was hard to think about moving a little "caveman" through a maze moving blocks around on the flight. I spent most of the time getting to know the people who were going to be spending the next couple weeks with us. The group seemed to start bonding quickly - starting after our adventures in JFK. And then one lady had a cancelled flight, a re-connection through Minneapolis, where the flight was delayed due to them needing to de-ice the wings, and then she missed her JFK flight (she finally met us in Amsterdam!). And then her bags didn't make it (they showed up a couple days later finally in Tanzania).

Once we landed I found it hard to believe we were all the way in Africa! After travelling across multiple continents in around 30 hours, it was like we could have known each other for years. I can finally say I've been to every major continent (except Antarctica - maybe I'll make it there someday!) We all had our bags except the lady who met us straight in Amsterdam and a couple others as well. But since we were staying a while, they were able to share clothes and essentials for a couple days - the bond in our group was already forming. Maybe God put us through these tests to form a tighter fellowship among us.

Welcome to Tanzania

It's hard to put into words how it felt to be immersed into a culture so different from our own - it was definitely an eye-opening experience. Seeing the way people lived in a land without the "creature comforts" we feel are necessities in America, like TV, internet, Facebook and Twitter - even more basic things like air conditioning. Oh wait, they don't even have electricity or even running water. Yet in their simpler lives they can experience deeper relationships, joy and thankfulness in the things they do have. I've heard that happiness isn't found in having everything you want, but it is instead being satisfied in what you do have.

The first day started with a tour of the main Compassion office in Arusha, just a few miles down from our hotel. It was interesting knowing that all the letters and supplies and everything gets routed through there and onward to the centers all around the country and then to the kids themselves. Seeing stacks of letters, some partially translated, made our sponsorship ministry seem so much more tangible.



Compassion headquarters in Arusha

We started with a heartfelt "Bwana asifiwe" (God bless you) and sang a few songs of worship in Swahili - many with simple tunes but powerful words (often a verse would be in English and one would be in Swahili so we could tell what we were singing). One song was "How Great Thou Art" - the melody was instantly recognizable. Our "hymnals" were small pamphlets with the words of about 100 hymns - no notes or music were given or needed - people picked up the simple melodies easily. Although many of the women seemed soft-spoken when we were talking, they knew how to belt out the words of their favorite hymns!

Roho yangu naikuimbie,
jinsi wewe ulivyo mkuu.

This means "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art!" Thankfully with Swahili being written with an English alphabet (thanks to the British who originally colonized Tanzania and introduced the English form of writing), we were able to start following along right away!

We got to meet a number of the Compassion staff and hear about the many years Compassion had been operating in Tanzania. I was impressed at how many children were sponsored all around the country, and how Compassion was truly making a difference. Many of these children are going to grow up as leaders and important figures around the country, so I felt the gift we were giving through Compassion is one that would keep on giving for generations to come.

After dinner, we walked down the street from the hotel and visited a Maasai women's bead shop, with intricate beadwork made from many of the local women. It provided a way for many

poor women to sell their handicrafts and make some money to support their families. A few of us bought necklaces and baskets. The shop empowered women who otherwise would have very limited means to care for their families (often the husbands would run away and leave them).

It was interesting just walking the streets - seeing women carrying their babies on their backs (they don't have strollers) and sometimes carrying buckets on their heads at the same time! Arusha is a land of contrasts - it was striking to see a woman in traditional dress carrying clothes on her head under an Internet cafe sign (which said "Electronic Appliances" with a P missing)... We ran into a family making aluminum-cast parts for a gate using a make-shift furnace dug from a hole in the ground. I think the aluminum came from melted-down soda cans, and part of the cast came from rings made from scrap metal. The people had remarkable creativity given their limited resources.

On the way back to the hotel, a woman saw us "wazungu" (foreign people or "aimless wanderers") on the street and asked where we came from. We mentioned about the Compassion program and that we were sponsoring kids in Tanzania. It turned out she went to an Assembly of God church and she was a Christian as well. I was flipping through the pictures on my camera as we were walking back, and came to the picture of us singing in the morning. One of my photos caught the page of the hymnal with the words to "How Great Thou Art" that we did earlier, and I started singing in Swahili! I could make out just enough of the blurry words on my camera screen to follow along - she was impressed and started singing along! It was like a piece of heaven as we were walking back to the hotel. And when we were near the hotel, I turned around to say bye, and there was an open view of Mt Meru down the flower-lined street with clouds finally parting to reveal the summit of the majestic 15,000 ft peak above the clouds! It felt like an affirmation from God that we were in the center of His will.



Street market just down from our hotel

A few of us stopped by a street market just a block from our hotel – I enjoyed buying some of the local produce and patronizing some of the farmers nearby. It was beautiful the way the fresh tropical fruits were laid out and I felt it provided a way for us to connect a bit with the local people. I bought a bunch of bananas (probably about 15-20 of them) for just 1000 tsh (Tanzanian shillings), which equals about 70 cents!

Visiting the Compassion centers

The next few days, we were going to go out and visit different centers around northern Tanzania. Some were right around Arusha, but some were going to be out in the country in pretty rural areas. That's what I was most interested in, getting away from the tourists (who mainly stay around Arusha and along the main roads to the national parks), and seeing people as they actually are. When Jesus came to earth, he didn't show up in some palace or big landmark in a great city, but he showed up to shepherds out in the countryside. He wanted to show up unexpectedly and meet people in their natural surroundings.

We had 2 buses and about 30 people, so each day we broke up into 2 groups of around 15 to visit different centers. I think the group was originally planned to be smaller (so we would just take one larger bus and all stay together), but I liked having the opportunity to go in smaller buses and be able to visit more remote places. And when we got back, we could share stories over dinner at the hotel.

On one of our days, we embarked on a bit of a bus journey to the east, past Moshi and to the south on some pretty bumpy dirt roads. I had actually expected most of Tanzania to be bumpy roads, like most third-world countries. But with tourism to the famous national parks on the rise, many of the major roads have been improved to decent freeways - we probably went up to 50-60 miles / hour on the good roads. But the roads seem to have been improved too quickly (when we got near a small village, they had to make traffic slow way down, and they used a set of 3 very sharp speed bumps that you had to slow to a crawl to get over them!) Luckily our bus driver knew exactly where they were and when to slow down (otherwise we would have probably left an axel behind on the road!).

We turned south off the main road, and we continued on increasingly rough, rutted and muddy 4WD roads (our buses handled quite well though) - and that's when I felt we were finally getting somewhere. The landscape was remarkably green from the recent rainy season, and all the flowers were blooming in glorious splashes of yellow and purple. Most of my visions of Africa were from pictures of the windswept dry plains with herds of wildebeest and zebras and elephants, but here it was completely different - green, mountainous, blooming, and people everywhere. It actually reminded me more of Costa Rica than Africa!

At the center, we met at their church - a simple cinder block building full of children. Compared to the mud brick houses that most people lived in, this church was rather luxurious. And it had a metal roof. And there was water (a group had come just a couple years ago and provided a well, so we had clean water). And there were beautiful blooming trees all around.



Playing games with the kids

On the way to the center, one of the women in our group was so moved by the fact that some of the children are still looking for sponsors, that she decided on the spot during the bus ride to start sponsoring one of them. At each center maybe about 75% of the children have a sponsor. The donations are distributed toward all the children in the center and not to specific children. Since there are always new children coming, there is always a need for sponsorship. At the service in the morning, that child was there, and she was united with her sponsor!

There were more kids than could fit in the church - some were peeking through the window, some through an open door, and I noticed a small crack in one of the bricks near the altar. I could see faces through the small gap in the wall taking turns for a peek at what we were doing! I could tell it really meant a lot to these kids. We started with some a cappella worship - no guitars or drums or organ here. Sometimes I feel the most basic form of worship can be the most meaningful - without the distractions of coordinating all the instruments. It seemed to be the most spontaneous and genuine form. Even though most people probably never really learned to sing and many of the individual voices were a bit out of tune, when it was all put together it sounded like a glorious symphony to the Lord.

It was interesting to see how we were really making a difference in the lives of the children. Compassion provides schooling, basic medical care and providing food. The children in our centers looked so much better and healthier than the street kids. Flipping through some of the notebooks in the office, we got to see some of the medical procedures and tests for the kids. Things we take for granted here in the US need to be checked carefully in Tanzania - I was flipping down through the list for one of the kids and was relieved to find that OK - no missing teeth, OK - no rashes on his back, OK - no signs of malaria, OK - no worms in his stools ... whew - glad he seemed to be fine! We had a team of medical missionaries at our church recently come back from southern India, and when even basic medical care has not been available for many years, they found some rather "interesting" conditions.

After tea, we went outside to start a little work project - they had a bunch of trees for us to plant. We were taking turns digging the holes with pick-axes through the iron-hard soil and bringing the small trees to be planted. These trees would grow up and give fruit and flowers and cheer up the area around the center.

I was intrigued at how people could be creative with so little belongings. At one point in the day, one of the pick-axes had a broken handle. Instead of just throwing it out and going to the local Home Depot to buy a new one (like we would in the disposable culture of America), one of the workers found a solution. Taking a bent nail (which would have been trash), hammering it into the broken part of the handle with a broken piece of wood (which would have also been trash), and fitting the head of the axe on the end of the handle, he was able to repair the tool. The nail created enough friction for the head to stay on, and bingo the axe was as good as new (and lasted the rest of the day). It was a bit of hard work planting the trees, but it was satisfying knowing we would be making a lasting difference.

Lunch was about ready. While we were planting trees, I took a short break to wipe the sweat and look into the "kitchen" where they were preparing the food. The "kitchen" was just a corner near one of the buildings where the cooks had open wood fires and big pots and were cooking

rice, beef, greens, and fried bananas. It seemed even more primitive as on a backpacking trip (when I went backpacking in the Sierras we had fancy MSR WhisperLite stoves, Mountain House freeze-dried food, and water filters). Here in Tanzania, they boiled the water and made everything from scratch. And it was done every day, not just in special cases like on a backpacking vacation. It seems in our sophisticated culture back in America I have some innate desire to return to a simpler way of life (hence going to the mountains, away from TV and many of the "creature comforts") - in Tanzania we were good at being very "green", living off the land as people have done for hundreds of years, and eating natural and organic foods. Although the meals were quite simple, the food was tasty and I didn't feel like it was missing anything (even though after a week, it would have been nice to have a little more variety!)

The beef was very tasty - I'm not sure exactly what all spices and flavorings they used. But I found out later that no part of the cow was wasted - all the pieces (including the stomach, intestines, and tail) were used! I felt it was a "don't ask don't tell thing" situation, but after enjoying the rich flavor, I wasn't complaining. And since all the food was organic (no high-fructose corn syrup and sodium benzoate and "blue 40" required), the flavors seemed even richer than we'd have in America with everything so processed with preservatives and artificial ingredients.



A wonderful day with the kids

After lunch, we got to go out and hand out gifts and supplies to the children. During the first night of our trip we all pooled our supplies together and divided out what would go to each center. After lunch we made our donation to the center - the kids were delighted to have new toys and supplies. I was glad we got toys that encouraged community, such as soccer balls, jumpropes and frisbees (it seems in America kids always want fancy toys to play with by

themselves such as electronic games that they can brag about) - as soon as the soccer balls came out, the kids were running all over the field. They kids also really enjoyed blowing bubbles and putting stickers all over themselves. And the small toy helicopters were much appreciated – the kids had probably never seen such a toy that could fly by just twisting it in your hand. The simplest toys seem to be enjoyed the most!

The kids tired us out pretty quick running on the field, doing handstands and playing soccer. But I didn't care if I was getting tired and a bit sunburned - we were there for the kids, and this was going to be a special and memorable day for a long time. Near the end of the afternoon, we were getting ready to get on the bus back to our hotel (we had a long bumpy drive to get back), and I saw a bunch of kids were playing on the jungle gym - setting up a perfect photo. It was a glorious moment seeing all the joy on the faces of the kids, the difference we were making in their lives, and knowing we were making a difference for the next generation. Behind the soccer field behind the jungle gym, I noticed an odd shaped white cloud in the distance - the morning had been a bit cool and cloudy, but the sun came out around lunchtime. I noticed the odd shaped cloud wasn't moving, and it wasn't until a few minutes later I realized it was the broad snow-capped summit of Mt Kilimanjaro peeking into the blue sky above the clouds! I got to see the remnants of the impressive glaciers after all before they had completely melted (which they worry is going to happen in the next decade or so)



Mt Kilimanjaro

Home Visit

Several days after working in the Compassion centers, we got to spend an hour or so visiting the homes of the families whose children attended the centers. Each center served all the families within a 3 km radius, so for families on the outskirts, that often meant a walk of an hour or more through the muddy streets. And even if it was raining, the moms would still brave the elements to take their children to the centers so they can have a better life.

One of our home visits was with a Maasai family closer to the 3 km perimeter of the center. Our group split up (about 5 of us did each home visit, so with 15 people, we split up into 3 homes), and we got in the bus to go to the homes. The women were thankful to have a ride and not have to walk all the way back home. It had rained recently and the roads were still rather muddy. I could see how the family was thankful for so many simple things - the rains had been good this year and their crops were doing well. And their chickens had just hatched a new group of chicks, promising more eggs in the future. The kids were running around and playing with the simplest toys - we handed them some empty water bottles and they easily found ways to amuse themselves with them. One kid found an old bicycle tire and was rolling it down the street (seems like a universal hobby for kids all around the world).

I was intrigued by the clothes some of the women were wearing. Although many wore traditional fabrics, some women were wearing donated clothes from around the world. Some with Disney characters, some with Korean writing (probably donated from Korean missionaries) - most of the women couldn't read, so the writing didn't have any meaning anyway. And one woman had a cartoon with Towelie from South Park (a vulgar American cartoon) with the phrase "I have no idea" - funny how that seemed to be true (and I'm glad she probably had no idea of what the shirt meant!).



Home visit

On another home visit, we were riding the bus and realized the bus would only go as far as the road allowed - the condition deteriorated to the point where all we could do was park the bus and we got out and walked. I knew we were pretty far out in the bush by now. I'm glad I had gotten all my shots and taken my malaria pills and everything - I knew I was definitely far from home. But we were going to somebody else's home and they lived there every day. We walked past a couple small herds of cattle and huts and eventually reached their home. The mother was there with several kids - they were thankful for our gifts of rice, maize flour, laundry soap and oil. The husband was away at work, struggling to make a few shillings to make ends meet. And with around 8 kids at home, it wouldn't have seemed possible without our help.

I looked around the house - a simple mud brick building with some very basic furniture (they were actually relatively well off to afford furniture and to have a separate hut for a barn for their cows). They were happy that their goat was producing milk and some of their fields were giving crops after the recent rains. I feel I have been so jaded that I'm too quick to complain if my filet mignon steak is a bit too salty or the wine is too dry - how many people around the world wouldn't even think about having a good steak to begin with?

We were chatting for a bit and I soon saw the mother bringing out cups of tea. They were making a sacrifice to give back to us - that was something I had least expected. Tea is expensive and they were sacrificing as a token of thankfulness to us coming all the way from America to visit them where they were. I had to give a heartfelt "asante sana" and "ashi" - Swahili and Maasai for Thank You. I wonder if I would ever see them again, but I could imagine someday in heaven we will meet again. While we were sipping tea, I saw the mother starting to dance in the traditional Maasai style, jumping up and down with her wide beaded necklace rocking back and forth. And all her bracelets and metal jangles were ringing - I couldn't make out the words what she was singing (I think they were traditional Maasai - not even Swahili), but her eyes lit up and she was worshipping the Lord. In a culture that had been worshipping spirits for generations and had been closed to Christianity for many years, it was an amazing testament to God's work in Tanzania.

It had been a great visit and it was getting late (the other groups were already back on the bus and they started to worry about us when we didn't show up on time), but I wish we could have stayed a little longer. The family handed us gifts - the women got necklaces and since I was the tallest guy in our small group, they handed me a Maasai beaded "warrior baton". I was actually planning to buy one of them, but I had been given one as a special gift. And I could display this gift at home and I will always remember this experience through it. We did one more song and we started dancing and bobbing the stick up and down (jingling the jangles) and worshipping the Lord.

It had been a remarkable blessing through this experience, but God had even more blessings in store. Just as I got up and was going to stoop through the narrow front door, something brushed my forehead that was hanging from a line near the ceiling. I looked up and saw that they were Compassion letters they had been saving for several years sent from one of the sponsors in America.

Back on the bus, one of our guys started handing out tennis balls when we passed groups of kids wandering the streets. The streets don't get much traffic out in the countryside besides the occasional vehicle or ox-cart, and when they saw our tour bus with a rainbow painted on the outside, they came out in wonder to see what was happening. I also still had a few bananas left from the market a couple days back (the bunch only cost about 70 cents, but I was already getting tired of bananas!), so I got to hand out the last few bananas to kids as we passed by.

The culture

Being in a nice hotel in Arusha was sort of bittersweet - I felt a bit detached from the way of life of the common people and the kids. I felt in a way we were like "rice Christians" (going to a poor country on our luxury bus, having pity on the "poor people" for a while, and handing out rice to feel good and "score points with God", and then head back to our comfortable lives when we were done). We were having a nice breakfast in the morning in the hotel, heading out for the day, then coming back to a western-style dinner at the hotel (or Indian / Chinese or Italian) but not eating what the local people would eat. At least we pretty much all stayed healthy for the whole trip - that was important. I'm glad that Compassion isn't just a one-time thing - it consists of a commitment where we send monthly payments and send letters periodically.

I was struck by how many of the people seemed to be just sitting around, like they were waiting for a bus that never came. It seemed like many of them were just lazy and no longer cared about working and making money and bettering themselves in society. They seemed to be content in their poor position. Maybe they were used to receiving care and donations from others and have become entrenched in that way of life. I hope and pray that through Compassion we can break that trend and empower people to first want a better way of life and then to be able to actually find it.

One of the nights in Arusha, we headed up another street and found a local artist displaying some of his work. A couple paintings were drying in the front lawn. We peeked inside to see an entire gallery of hundreds of works - many with Maasai themes and of the extensive wildlife of Africa. I could tell the people were very proud of their culture. I had often seen pictures of indigenous Indian people in America, such as historic photographs of older Sioux and Navajo Native Americans. Their faces always seemed weathered and lined with age, and it seemed their way of life was ending in their generation. Their descendents were giving up their culture to enter more mainstream society and live that they felt would be a better life. I was glad in Tanzania to sense their way of life was going to be preserved for years to come.

One of the days, we were heading on a longer drive to one of the more remote villages high in the mountains about an hour west of Arusha. We had to get up a bit earlier for the long ride to the student center. I had a hard time sleeping the previous night, being eagerly anticipating a big day. I didn't quite know what to expect, except that God had some great things planned and we just had to be available to be used by Him. I felt inadequately prepared to be doing "great works for God's Kingdom" but I think God honors even our small efforts to serve Him. It

seemed like instead of us necessarily changing the situation around us, we were there mostly to observe and learn from them, and we would be changed instead.

The dirt road took us many miles high up in the forested mountains blooming with many different kinds of flowers and exotic plants - since we were a couple thousand feet higher, the vegetation was even more diverse and lush. The morning started off fairly cloudy, but as we headed around the mountains to the lee side, the clouds were held back against the peaks, giving us bright blue skies.

We passed many Maasai herders along the way - there were often just a couple men with their staffs with their herds of cows out in the fields around us. Often the cows were just grazing or moving sluggishly toward new pastures. Their wealth was determined by how many cattle they had. Wealth was a very tangible thing in a society that still used barter for many things. I sensed how much of what we consider as valuable is virtual. Stock options, information, and my collection of songs on iTunes have no intrinsic physical value - by themselves they are just bits on a computer or pieces of paper - their value is determined by our volatile society (even our paper money is that way!). For example if a company went bankrupt, all my stock would no longer have value since the shares would be worthless. There is not the same feeling of permanence. I read an article recently how many people are going back to collecting vinyl LP's - having even extensive playlists of mp3's doesn't satisfy in the same way. With a vinyl LP, the music is stored in the physical media and some effort is required to get it to play (setting up the record on the turntable, lining up the needle, and waiting for the reassuring hiss that the record is playing) - it is more of a tangible experience.



Rural part of the countryside

I felt like we were going back in time throughout the morning, experiencing a way of life that hasn't changed in centuries. The lush green hills dotted with groups of the cylindrical Maasai houses, plantations, and street markets passed by as we climbed toward a summit where this remote Compassion center was located.

Heaven in the Mountains

Stepping out of the bus, we were greeted by a piece of heaven. A group of intricately clad Maasai women welcomed us and led us toward the church where the children were having their worship service. As soon as the doors were opened we were instantly immersed in the most amazing praises to the Lord. One of the kids up front (must have been one of the "brave" ones) led each line of the song and in a call-and-response fashion, 200 or so kids would respond in jubilant worship. The words were pretty simple Swahili and came right from Scripture - no special multi-media presentation with fancy graphics or sound system was required. God gave us voices to sing - some kids even figured out harmony parts to go along with the main melodies!

It was interesting observing how the kids learned and were so well-behaved. They looked to be in about the 3rd or 4th grade. Part of the lesson was about the Maasai culture - how they danced, used staffs for herding cattle, and different guttural voiced calls they would use. In most parts of the world, preserving culture often falls to the wayside in favor of becoming more "modern and sophisticated". Of course most people in these remote parts of Africa don't have access to modern conveniences and influences from the internet and TV. It was refreshing to be away from much of the clutter of our busy lives in America to witness a simpler way of life and to appreciate the beauty around us and cherish the relationships we have. In much of Western society, independence is a high priority - having cars, news at our fingertips on our phones, and instant messaging allows us to keep our independence, yet allowing us to keep people at arm's length in case we should feel hurt. Our community is much more fractured - I feel like our independence comes at a higher price than we originally imagined.



Traditional Maasai dance

As the kids were lining up for tea, we were being treated to a Maasai dance show. About a dozen women clad in decorative necklaces and earrings and bracelets with jingly beads came up to the front of the church. It started as a fairly subdued low chant-singing, but as the song went on, it rose to a feverish pitch as the ladies were jumping up and down in a traditional "adumu" dance. (Adumu means jumping). I'm curious how much the song and dance style had changed in hundreds of years. It felt like going through a time machine to simpler days and seeing life as it may have been hundreds of years ago, uncorrupted by modern influences. Even some of our women took turns putting on the necklaces and clumsily joining in the dance and forgetting about all their other cares for a while!

I feel like there is a deep and often buried sense of pessimism about the present days and into the future. I usually tend to enjoy "nostalgic" times - reminiscing about the past, childhood and friends I had many years ago. The past is certain (it's already happened), but the future is uncertain - it's almost like people might be afraid that God's grace was good until now, but is there still enough for tomorrow? I've worked to preserve the good memories from the past, and it seems like when thinking about the future, I'm worrying about things and start thinking of worst-case scenarios (what if our bus breaks down and I get sick and we end up getting stuck somewhere and I miss my flight back to the US and there is a crisis at work... etc). Since the past is certain and I have good memories of the past, I would rather look back and try to re-live in the past instead of trusting in God's grace to make fresh new memories! Maybe God wants us to be able to live in the present, enjoying His provisions at the current moment.

I've always enjoyed going to "primitive" places - like when I went to Alaska a few years ago where glaciers still cover the mountains and grizzlies still roam free. And going to the redwood

forest in northern CA where the big trees have been growing for thousands of years. The future always seems bleak (the glaciers are melting with global warming, the bears are dying and the trees are all being cut). And I would be right in thinking of the future as bleak, if God's grace disappeared and He was no longer in control. Maybe that shows a lack of faith - I know I probably shouldn't think that way, but my human nature gravitates in that direction. Every day, I need to trust in God's goodness and when difficult situations arise, He should be able to use them for His glory.



Jen doing the limbo

This had been a slight digression, but the experiences being in such a different environment often give me a fresh perspective. After class, the kids got an extended "recess" time - we set up a bunch of games (most of the kids had never heard of duck-duck-goose or the hokey-pokey so we had to teach them... but I felt we almost had to re-teach ourselves those games - it's probably been 20 years since playing these games!) And the kids definitely playing limbo with Jen (it's doubtful the kids have seen a 6-foot white woman in a while). Jen would have to stoop down pretty low (just barely clearing the bar) and the kids would just barely duck their head an inch to go under! Again, it was great to be able to give so many gifts of sporting goods like soccer balls, jump ropes and school supplies to the kids who had very few things. And these were all things that encouraged them to play together and that they could be truly thankful for.

After recess, we took turns helping serve lunch. The food looked quite good and I enjoyed being able to serve the kids - they don't often get to eat meat and rice (these things are expensive and many families get by with maize flour and vegetables). But it was hard work, stooping down and reaching into the large pots. And when one line of kids was finally finished and I thought I was about done, a whole new line was forming from one of the other classes. In

all there were probably around 200 kids we served! Finally, in the end we got served - enjoying the rice, beef, bananas, greens, and strong ginger soda (Tangawizi) for our lunch.

After lunch, we got to play with the kids a bit more - throwing Frisbees, kicking soccer balls and making paper bag puppets. They were having so much fun - and in such a carefree way. The hours went by so quickly - whoops it was already 3:00 and we should have been rolling already. I saw one of the staff getting the kids organized into a big group - they looked so cute and made a wonderful farewell picture!

After taking a bunch of photos, I thought we were finally wrapping up when I saw the kids were lining up and handing out gifts. I hadn't really paid attention earlier, but each of the kids was wearing a beaded cross or bracelet that they made themselves. But there were so many kids - I thought it was probably just one of the classes (with maybe 20 kids as "representatives"), but I found out that every kid had one! By the time they were done, we each were wearing a nice collection of probably a dozen or so necklaces / bracelets! Like in the home visit earlier, I thought we had come to give blessings and gifts, but I felt we were getting showered with even more blessings and gifts in return!

The kids were so sad to see us go - they thought of us almost as angels from heaven. Some of the kids were stroking my arm to see if I was real. And one of the women in our group had her hair braided by some of the girls! We were getting ready to get back on the bus, but wanted to get a few more pictures first. In traditional Maasai culture, pictures are often inappropriate (unless you ask and they give permission), but with the children, they loved getting their pictures taken. The camera was like a magic box that would flash and the kids could immediately see the result. One of the kids took my camera and started playing with it, taking random pictures of each other - they would gather around the magic glowing screen and gaze in wonder. I finally got my camera back, and some of the pictures that the kids took of each other had the best expressions of genuine wonder and awe that they ended up being keepers in my album!



The kids had a wonderful day

It was sad when we were on the bus and the doors closed - it felt like we were being shut off and pulled away from the kids. Like a wonderful movie that just ended and the screen went dark. Or a symphony was playing and we had to leave during the middle of the performance. And what was even more heart-breaking was looking out the window behind the bus and seeing the kids running after the bus - they couldn't bear to let us go!

It was a bittersweet moment, since our next stop would be Tarangire national park where we were going to spend the next couple days on a short safari. I had been looking forward to the safari for some time now (finally get to see the elephants and giraffes up close!), but I wish we had a little more time with the kids.

Safari

As we were heading back toward the main road, we got part-way and suddenly discovered that whoops the road was closed since they decided to start doing some construction! But no worries - our bus just pulled off the road to the dirt and grass nearby and drove around the construction. A Maasai market was taking place nearby and we had to weave through some Maasai herds, so actually the diversion ended up being an interesting adventure. I felt we should have stopped to look around for a bit, but the more we stopped, it would be forever before we ever got to our safari lodge!

Back on the main road, we headed west and south toward Tarangire National park - one of the game parks near Lake Manyara. It felt like a long drive, but it seemed a good way to unwind to let my mind process so many things for the week. I was dozing when someone in the bus shouted "Zebra!" My mind raced back to life and I looked at how all the faces of everyone in the bus were glued to the windows. I scrambled for my SLR camera as fast as I could find it and fit the zoom lens and get it ready.

A small group of zebras were grazing just off to the right side of the bus (perfect since I was sitting on that side) - we passed within maybe 50 feet of them! I always thought of zebras as one of the more "exotic" animals - and I've thought of the exotic animals as being the most endangered. So I felt quite privileged to be able to see a bunch of them in the wild! And we weren't even in the game park (the "proper" viewing area). I've been used to seeing interesting animals in confined areas like zoos and animal parks, so I was a bit astonished that they were just by the side of the road!



Zebras and Lake Manyara

After seeing the first group of zebras, there was another even larger group. Then a whole herd of them - maybe several dozen in the distance. They were everywhere. I fished for my binoculars (which I had yet to use on the trip) and was rewarded with stunning views. A little further down the road was a herd of wildebeest just roaming through the meadow. It was the end of the rainy season, so everything was pretty lush and green (and our bus driver did a great

job getting through the muddy and rutted stretches!) The animals are migrating during the dry season, always in the restless pursuit of water.

As we were getting close to our lodge, a few baboons bounded about to our left, and then even a couple warthogs. We were getting our safari even before starting our "official safari" drive! When we got to the lodge, we saw the other bus was already there (and had been for a couple hours). I had lost track of time (and maybe the rest of our group did as well), but I wasn't complaining - we had such a great time with the kids up on the mountain village.

I finally felt like we were on a vacation - all was quiet and peaceful. The clouds had completely cleared, revealing a beautiful wide-open sunset view above Lake Manyara. We were sipping glasses of wine while watching the zebras lazily make their way across the meadow in the distance. Venus shone brightly as the evening star in the fading pale blue sky. One by one more of the stars came out - I was looking forward to seeing some dark skies full of stars. On the famous "Earth at Night" portrait of our planet, sub-Saharan Africa has some of the darkest skies in the world. With most of the countryside being very poor, there are very few people with electricity. With so few lights to pollute the sky (our lodge was one of the few places in the whole area to even have lights), we got to see the band of the Milky Way start to appear. I got my SLR camera and set up a few shots using one of the railings as a tripod. The Southern Cross, Orion, the complete band of the southern Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud, and even the zodiacal light was clearly visible. Zodiacal light is only visible from very dark skies (I think the only other time I'd ever seen it was in Death Valley on a 4WD road trip a few winters ago), and is caused by the sun reflecting off many small particles orbiting in the plane of our solar system. A satellite and a couple shooting stars streaked by. I borrowed a friend's binoculars and got to see the Andromeda galaxy, Orion nebula, some of the southern sky objects (which I wasn't sure what they are since I only had a northern sky map!), but the climax was seeing the Omega Centauri cluster in all its glory of a million stars!

God often speaks in a still small voice and I feel our lives are always so crowded with distractions that we aren't able to hear it. Seeing truly dark skies untainted by light pollution was like being in a moment untainted by the distractions of daily life and we could observe things that are always present like the Milky Way. God is always present too, but with so many "weeds and thorns" sprouting up, it seems His messages are often being choked out by daily worries and distractions. Some part of me longs for that kind of pure and simple environment every day. But I missed home and friends back in the US at the same time - it was a bittersweet time.

I came back to the dinner area just in time for Kim's birthday celebration - they had made a nice cake and we got to sing in English, then we got to hear Happy Birthday in Swahili! It had been long, but fabulous day. On my way back to our cabin (actually just a screened in "bure" like we had on a trip to Fiji a while back), I had to be careful to dodge the lizards, frogs, a praying mantis and other interesting bugs and thorny acacia trees along the path (thorns about 3 inches long!).

Our bibles had finally come in - we had ordered Swahili-English bibles a few days ago, and one of our guides ordered copies for a bunch of us to give to our sponsored children when we met in the next few days. At our cabin, I leafed through the bible, knowing this would probably be a

very special gift to my sponsored child. I couldn't wait to meet him - I'm glad they have our visit at the end, so I can share all my stories and experiences of the trip so far. I wrote out John 3:16 in Swahili (cribbing from the Bible!) and put a big Mungu akubariki (God bless you) on the inside of the cover. I hope and pray that it would be a cherished gift for many years to come.



Our home by Tarangire national park

I felt we were on an exotic vacation as we pulled the mosquito nets over our beds and went to sleep with the chorus of crickets, frogs and who knows what other animals are around. Some people had a zebra come almost right up to their hut earlier in the day!

The morning dawned sooner than I expected - I must have been more tired than I thought from the big day yesterday! It was crystal clear the previous night, but low clouds rolled in overnight to a grey overcast. But I've heard that with cloudy skies, many animals that would otherwise be hiding in the shade of the trees might be out. I was anticipating an adventure in any case. We had a nice breakfast buffet and prepared our box lunches to take out on the safari and we were soon on our way.

We had just gotten going and we stopped - somebody had forgotten to turn in their key. Thankfully they have a big sign saying "KEYS" by the driveway - the metal keys are expensive (no disposable plastic keys with magnetic stripes in this place!), and we were pretty far from civilization, so to get one of the cabins re-keyed would be a considerable effort. But as we were stopped (right by our driveway), I was already prepping my camera for the herd of wildebeest that was ambling their way across one of the fields. We were truly in a wild place - felt a million miles from home.

One of the first things we saw in the park was rather unexpected - when the bus stopped, I expected a herd of elephants or lions or something, but there was a mound of interesting looking squirrels. Actually they were meerkats - they would take turns climbing to the top of their small hill, standing on their hind legs and their cute teddy-bear faces would be posed perfectly!

A little further in, we were crossing the Tarangire River and suddenly there was a big splash in the water. I saw something moving but couldn't tell what it was - must have been something about 6 feet long. Then suddenly a giant lizard sprang out of the water with something in its mouth. It was a monitor lizard and it had just caught a frog! It was shaking the frog back and forth for a while and then - gulp! Then the lizard went back to the water for a couple seconds, and there it had caught another frog! We hung out there for probably 15 minutes and in that time, we saw the lizard grab half a dozen frogs! One of the frogs slipped from the lizard's mouth and almost got away, but the lizard was quick and grabbed it again. And I got it all on video!

Finally, what we've been anticipating for the whole day was just ahead. We climbed up the bank from the river to a flowery meadow, and just ahead was an elephant probably 100 feet away. He was just grazing and ambling his way through the flowers, snapping off branches with his thick trunk and having lunch. He even came toward us for a bit so we got quite a nice face-on view. Soon afterward, we would see an entire herd of probably a dozen elephants all around us - even including some babies that were barely high enough to see above the tall grass.



Elephant in Tarangire national park

Further in the park, several herds of baboons came bounding along the road (we had to stop to let them cross), and then a bunch of gazelles came up from the other side, and we watched them graze in the flowers for a while. Then around the next corner we saw a family of about 5

giraffes. Two had their necks crossed as in an intimate pose. We saw groups of impalas and several other deer-like animals that I didn't know the name of. Wow, to see so much diversity of life in such a small area was impressive. God was so creative to come up with all the animals, and I felt privileged to see them in their natural state. I had only seen these animals in zoos and in the San Diego animal park before. Back in Arusha we were saying at the Impala hotel and it felt good to have actually seen real impalas finally!



Giraffes

We were paralleling the river on some pretty bumpy 4WD roads (our bus was doing as well as a safari jeep!) and there was movement in the trees above us. A family of monkeys were hanging out - grooming each other, playing, running up and down the trees, and there were even some naughty scenes there too - I think one was getting ready to have sex! Back at the hotel, I was reviewing my pictures and realized that whoops, some inappropriate content made its way on one of my photos so I would have to be careful when sharing them when I got home...

We headed back to a nice picnic area to enjoy our box lunches, and we had a great view over the river valley and of several species of colorful birds all around us. The feathers gleamed a shiny blue. Everything seemed exotic - even the caterpillars and the ants seemed strange! I'd definitely have to come back for a bigger safari sometime - we didn't even go very far into Tarangire (and that's one of the smaller parks - we didn't have time to go all the way to the

Serengeti or Ngorongoro crater). It was getting late and we had to start making headway back east to our hotel.

Visiting our sponsored children

We got back to our hotel in the late afternoon and had a little time to kill. It was raining outside and I decided to put on the TV for a few minutes - Manchester United was playing in a soccer match. I was looking forward to the World Cup coming up soon - I could watch soccer for hours. But I was soon dismayed to see some of the headlines scroll across the bottom of the screen - one of those was "Ash cloud billows again in Iceland, disrupting flights" - shoot, not again! I wish I hadn't turned on the TV. I wonder if we'd be stuck for a few days - the band from one of the schools in Mountain View was touring in Europe for spring break, and they stuck for a week in London (luckily the community was able to pitch in to cover the costs that the near-bankrupt school could not afford!).

I knew I should be able to have peace since God was in control - if the ash cloud was going to cause problems, I should take assurance in the fact that His grace would be sufficient. My mind still seemed to go to the worst-case scenario very quickly. During halftime, I channel-surfed a little and stumbled across an episode of Family Guy - one of my favorite shows (and one of the most popular in America, becoming a sort of cultural icon). While I could be entertained by the crude humor in America, somehow after coming back from 2 days in Tarangire and seeing the smiles on the kids' faces for a week, the vulgar jokes almost made me cry. I think the "reverse culture-shock" of coming back to America would be harder to deal with than the original culture shock of going to Tanzania in the first place.

After we had dinner at the hotel - the fabric guy showed up again (he showed up a few days ago and we got to place orders for tailor-made shirts and dresses. Yay I got my shirt - perfect and tailor-made!), and the artist that we visited a week ago decided to drop by the hotel for a visit. We figured it was a good way for him to make a few sales since our whole group was there! It was a win-win, since we didn't feel like walking 4 blocks in the rain to his shop. I had already bought a painting depicting the Maasai culture and wildlife (and this resonated so much more with me now, having actually seen all those things in real life) - but maybe I should have waited. Since so many people in our group were buying things, he cut an even better deal with them!

The last day of our trip was the "grand finale" - getting to spend a day with our sponsored children. My child Samuel Ulimboka was from Arusha itself, just a few km outside of town. But many of the children came from far away, sometimes taking a whole day on a bus. Their sacrifices were remarkable to come from all around the country to meet us.

As I saw the first busload of kids arrive, my heart was racing - I knew one of them had to be mine. I had seen a bunch of pictures of my kid, but I wondered how he would look in real life. He looked tall and handsome from all the pictures. I knew he would be one of the older kids in the group - he was going to be turning 19 years old. I wondered how his voice would sound - would he be outgoing or shy? Would he want to play with all the other kids or hang out in a

quiet environment? I knew from his letters that he wanted to go to college and be a lawyer. Good for him!

I scanned all the faces for a couple minutes but I couldn't recognize Samuel. My heart sank for a bit but I saw a few people still waiting. I knew that the visit would be hard for some children and some may be late (and one teenage girl had disappeared - probably ran away with an older man). Again I feared the worst, but just as I turned around, I saw with arms outstretched Samuel along with our interpreter Amini. We embraced heartily - after getting to know each other for about 4 years through letters, our moment had finally arrived!



Amini, me and Samuel

My mind had been flooding with questions - I was up the night before in our hotel thinking about what to ask. How could I use the time most "efficiently" since I knew I would have just a few hours. I didn't want to forget anything and "waste" the time. I've always thought of when I get into heaven, what is the first question I would ask Jesus when we finally meet. What would be most interesting "information" I could gain right away? But I wonder if when we do meet, that those questions wouldn't really matter anymore - I'd be happy enough just being in His presence. Being in the relationship would be far more important than gaining information. So maybe I shouldn't waste my time thinking about such questions.

I had brought the Swahili-English bible - I thought since he was learning English it would be a great resource. He seemed to really appreciate the gift. I hope and pray that he continues strong in the Lord and the bible would be a good way to continue learning English and growing in his faith. Most of our time was fairly low-key - he was remarkably well-dressed and handsome. It was great knowing that my sponsorship seemed to be making quite a difference

in his life. He was in form IV and had 2 more years of secondary school to finish before starting college. And then he had aspirations of being a lawyer after that! Good for him! I hope and pray that he can continue making a difference in society and the God would get the glory.

We were in a beautiful mansion surrounded by lush tropical gardens - Samuel enjoyed nature and the outdoors and liked showing me all the different colors and shapes of the tropical flowers. May was a good time to see everything blooming. We enjoyed picking passion fruits from the tree (they were sweeter than I expected and I had to put it down after eating just half - it was so sweet!). Samuel was pretty observant - picking out some interesting spiders, a chameleon, and even monkeys swinging in the trees behind the garden!

I knew Samuel liked to draw, so after lunch I pulled out a pad of paper and he started drawing - I wondered if any of the drawings in his letters were just traced from pictures or drawn from scratch, and after seeing how he drew a few things in the pad from scratch, I was impressed. He liked drawing animals and he drew a car - and paid so much attention to detail. Maybe he could have a hobby on the side and be an artist, like the guy we bought the paintings from earlier.

It was such an interesting experience - he liked to talk about what he was learning in school, how he was learning English (actually his English was already pretty good), and his aspirations for the future. I figured he liked the outdoors from his drawings of the wildlife and scenery. The garden was beautiful and he enjoyed just being outside. At first I wondered what we were going to do for the whole day - the time was mostly unstructured and we had pretty much the whole place to ourselves for the day. But the time flew by as we were hanging out. We got to form an informal singing group and do a few songs with some of the other sponsored kids. I enjoyed having him get to meet some of the other kids as well. He was a bit shy, but maybe that was normal since he didn't know the other kids and they were different ages. But we all got to participate in a couple sports like soccer and volleyball.

I was interested in hearing about his culture upbringing. His father was from the Nyakyusa tribe and his mother was Haya (so he would identify himself as Nyakyusa = his father's tribe, instead of half one and half the other). Christianity came to Tanzania around 1900 - from German missionaries. Although it ended up spelling part of the downfall of their culture to be mixed with Western civilization, the people had opportunities for education and growth that they had never had before. And God through the missionaries worked to cleanse the people from the capricious demonic spirits that had held them in bondage for centuries. If it wasn't for all the missionaries and God's work ahead of us, I bet we would have never had been able to visit Tanzania and experience the culture in the same way. I was fascinated in hearing about the culture and the history of the different people groups in Tanzania. Amini our guide was very knowledgeable and loved to go on and on, but I didn't want to take too much time from Samuel either.

During lunch, he started talking about his favorite food - makande - a stew made from maize and beans. He also ate a lot of bananas and casaba leaves. Rice is expensive and meat is even more expensive, so they were only enjoyed for special occasions. I mentioned one of my favorite foods was Ben & Jerry's ice cream. I figured since it was often hot in Tanzania, he

would have enjoyed ice cream. But in a house without electricity, it would have been hard to keep cold for long! He said last time he even had ice cream was a couple years ago. I guess I'm doubly spoiled since I mentioned not only ice cream, but a particular (expensive) brand of ice cream. And more specifically my favorite is the Cherry Garcia flavor!

After lunch, we went out to play soccer a bit - the sun had come out by now and it had gotten nice. It was already about 3:00 - time had indeed flown by! We all had gotten gifts for our children and their families - sheets that could be used for beds or curtains or tablecloths, kitchen supplies, some nice framed photos and some good chocolate truffles from Amsterdam (which luckily didn't melt the whole time!). But I think the greatest gift I could give was just being there. We were just taking some parting shots with Samuel and me and Amini my interpreter when Amini's cell phone rang. It was Samuel's mom calling to say thank you for visiting! She was overjoyed that I had come all the way to Tanzania - she was busy and wasn't able to come, but we got to talk for a minute. She was laughing the whole time - she couldn't believe it was my voice! I barely managed a thank you and a Bwana Asifiwe (Praise the Lord) between her giggles on the phone.

Alas, it was time to head back to the hotel and start getting things packed up for heading back home. I realized I could leave some of my clothes behind as a donation - it is expensive to get nice clothes in Tanzania. I ended up leaving my whole duffel bag (which was mostly empty by now anyway after I give away all my gifts), along with some jeans and a couple shirts and shampoo (things I could pick up again back in the US anyway). I felt they would be far more useful there in Tanzania than for me back home.

Celebration and Farewell

It was our final night and we were reflecting on almost 2 weeks of God's goodness. I felt like as icing on the cake, we got to see one of the finest views of Mt Meru right outside our hotel window.



Clouds and Mt Meru right near our hotel

We enjoyed a nice "celebration dinner" at a fancy Indian / Italian restaurant near Arusha - it was bittersweet knowing it was going to be our last dinner together. I was looking forward to finally being home again (but dreading the travel itself - and maybe being stuck somewhere), but I was going to really miss the wonderful people and being so close to what God was doing there. We were treated to a cool acrobat show - a group of 5 guys came in tiger-stripe suits and did everything from juggling to balancing a bottle on a stick to multiple back flips, and even finishing with an extreme limbo. They lowered the bar a few inches each time (Jen got to try it once and barely made it!). Then they lowered the bar again and again until it was barely 10 inches above the floor. Then they set it on fire! The limbo master made it by flexing his legs until they were almost spread completely flat. Only his feet touched the floor and he cleared the bar with barely an inch to spare - amazing!

After dinner we got to hang out one last time at the bar and swap stories a bit. A couple people in our group were trying to learn Swahili and impress the locals. During breakfast one morning, one of them wanted to get some coffee, but as she asked for the coffee, she slightly mispronounced the Swahili phrase for "give me coffee" (nipe coffee), which changed the meaning to "slap me". And as a joke, she got a slap! After being in Tanzania, it was fun to play with learning the language. I wish I had studied a bit more before coming. At the bar at the hotel we were playing spades and sipping Kilimanjaro beer and learning some of the colloquial phrases - what's up? (kipi) and cool! (poa), and they were practicing phrases with us too! The label on the beer said (you might not be able to climb it, but you can drink it!). None of us were climbing the mountain this time - maybe sometime in the future. (but we enjoyed the beer!)

Celebration and Farewell

The last day, we had some time in the morning for shopping for souvenirs and starting to collect our thoughts and memories of the trip. I've generally been averse to buying "tourist junk" - so many places have trinkets for sale made to look authentic but aren't. You could buy elephants that looked nice initially, but were plastic and probably made in the Philippines with child slave labor. But they were very cheap. One thing that was definitely not cheap, but was worth getting was a local mineral called tanzanite that is only found near Mt Kilimanjaro. It actually sells for near the price of diamond, and even has grades and cuts similar to diamond. It is a brilliant blue and has a beautiful crystal structure. To patronize the local miners, I bought a couple pieces of rough stones which showed the natural crystal structure clearly (as compared to cut stones that are artificially shaped). A couple of people in our group actually went off for the morning to tour one of the tanzanite mines (skipping the shopping) – they got to see how it took a considerable amount of effort to find and extract the precious mineral. I collect minerals of all different kinds from around the world and probably would have been interested in touring the mine had I known they were going – I see how God reveals His beauty in creation even in the small intricate details of mineral crystals. And taking the extra effort to search for those blessings is often highly rewarded. God didn't need to create those minerals (the world would probably run just as fine without tanzanite), but it seems like He wanted to show some of His artistry that way.

I enjoy hearing different kinds of music from all around the world - it tells a lot about different cultures, how they can express themselves and worship in different styles. Our God can be worshiped in so many ways. A worship CD was playing in the store, and the store owner mentioned it was a local Christian artist. I asked where I could get a copy and instead when the song was finished the owner pulled the CD from the player and sold it right there for a few dollars!

An interesting part of the traditional Maasai culture is expressed in the abundance of masks that would be worn at ceremonies. Some of the faces looked quite happy like they were laughing, some looked deep in thought, but some looked outright demonic. Naturally, I was most curious about the demonic looking masks since they were unique. But then again I couldn't imagine having one of those displayed in my house! And I wasn't interested in giving one to a friend to have in his house. I realized sort of an evil fascination with those spirits embodied in the masks. I sensed an inner conflict - like one part of me should just turn away, but another part wanted to find out more. Maybe it's like in horror movies where I should just turn away, but it piques my curiosity to dabble just a little. I'm glad we have freedom in Christ where we don't need to pray to all kinds of spirits and hold ceremonies and try to please the "gods" around us. We have direct access to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We did a short stop at one of the grocery stores in town - right across from the Stigbucks coffee (a Starbucks rip-off). The prices of the imported goods were incredible. I saw a box of cereal for 13800 shillings - I figured it was about a dollar (it's 1350 shillings to the dollar), and most things in Tanzania were cheap (to us, but still quite expensive to the local people), so a dollar for some cereal seemed reasonable. But I misread the amount - it was 13800, not 1380, so it was over \$10! That would be half a month's wages to a typical family! I noticed the

grocery store specialized in western foods (cereal, candy, ice cream) that the locals would not eat - in fact it was mostly white westerners shopping there! I just bought one thing - a can of Africafe coffee (the local Arabica instant coffee which is indeed consumed by many of the locals) - for about \$2 (that would be cheap at Safeway back in the US). I sort of dreaded the reverse culture-shock I knew I was going to experience back in America - gotta get used once again to the consumerism and highly processed sweetened foods and high fructose corn syrup again.

Well, all our bags were packed at the hotel and we were loading the buses one final time. We had to say bye to JoAnn our leader - she had been excellent the whole time! She was off to Uganda in a couple days to lead another sponsor tour. She needed a couple days in between not only to unwind from this trip, but also to work out the final details of the next trip.

It seemed a long drive back to the airport and I was just ready to try to sleep as much as I could - I was going to need it as much as I could get with many hours on planes and many hours of jetlag to sleep off. We had just gotten to the airport and were offloading the luggage when I turned around and saw the clouds parted to reveal a majestic final view of the sunset rays on the snow-capped Mt Kilimanjaro! A fitting end for a wonderful trip.



A bunch of us in our newly made African shirts made from the local fabric

Well that was it - we had a smooth and rather uneventful flight back to America. We flew over the ash cloud (which had recently lowered in height allowing us to fly over it instead of cancelling our flight - it was flowing somewhere over southern Europe, and gave us a brilliant red sunrise). We also crossed the Italian Alps - most of the Mediterranean and Europe were

obscured with solid clouds so I didn't expect to see much. But as I got up to use the bathroom on the flight, I started to see rows of mountain peaks stretching all around us - the peaks of the alps broke through the clouds, revealing numerous glaciers, lakes, and deep green valleys below us.

Some of the tulip fields in Amsterdam were still in bloom and we were treated to views of some of the famous windmills and colorful fields as we touched down after an 8 hour flight. It was then a short layover - but I had to buy some more chocolate and some gifts - the Netherlands are famous for the blue and white ceramic tile and pottery. And I had to have a cup of real Starbucks coffee to wake me up!

On the flight to JFK, I finally finished my book (I hardly read any of it in Tanzania in the hotel since I was out - and I knew I could always read it at home!). I got a good view of downtown Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty welcoming us back to the good old USA again! And there was Ground Zero – I could see there was finally some visible progress of construction (for 8 years it was mostly still an empty hole in the ground as design plans were being laid out and then the foundation for the new Freedom Tower was being built). After we touched down at the airport, my first instinct was to go for the Sbarro pizza place - I hadn't had pizza in 2 weeks (even though I didn't particularly miss it at the time), but now seeing it available again sparked my old habits once again. I downed a greasy pizza and sugary Dr Pepper (full of corn syrup). It saddened me a bit, actually to realize how easy it was to revert to old ways. I knew my life would be forever changed by this trip to Tanzania, but the change wouldn't happen all at once. I feel we've been given a great gift of getting to experience Tanzania, but it was a big gift that couldn't be all unwrapped at once. It would take weeks or even months (maybe even a lifetime!) to truly unwrap the gift and accept the wondrous gift God has given us.

When we crossed the Sierra on our final leg to SFO, I could see the lights of the San Francisco area far in the horizon. It all seemed like a dream. I just want to say thank you to everybody that made this trip possible - for JoAnn & Carmen our wonderful trip leaders, for Mary, Agnes & Charles for being with us, and for everyone on the trip for being a wonderful family the whole time. And thanks Ed for the ride back from the airport and keeping my care safe!

It was a great trip and I looking forward to being able to come back some day.



Group photo at one of the Compassion centers