

# *Gambian Journal*

*by NBS Board Member Tim Coombs*

**Sunday, March 6, 2011**

**First night in Banjul. We were given a VIP welcome and met at the airport by Mother Priscilla, Janet, Lisong and Fr. Pius. We had dinner at the Catholic retreat house, GPI, around 9:30PM. We're all pretty tired, and our body clocks were all off. We all slept in fits and starts all the way here, so I'm hoping I sack out pretty quickly. I am looking forward to daytime and seeing the city a bit more. Tomorrow we meet with the NBS Gambians, Pentecostal ministers, and the bishops of the Methodist, Episcopal and Catholic churches. God is good.**

**Monday, March 7, 2011**

**After a much needed sleep, we had breakfast and planned our strategy for the week. In the afternoon we were supposed to meet with the groups mentioned above. The NBS Gambians came about 4:15PM. It was heartening to hear of their work over the last three years. Good things are happening, particularly in Benjamin's church. Fr. Pius was there from Holy Cross Catholic Church. We had a nice dinner there this evening. Fr. Pius apparently did a telling of the Gospel and his lectors do tellings of the other lessons in worship when Bishop Ellison was visiting. The church was electric and the Bishop is sold on biblical storytelling. Tom is negotiating with him about having all his lectors trained in it next year. We will see. Again we are all tired. Richard, Nancy, Tom Amelia, and Thelma send their love. We appreciate all the prayers.**

**Tuesday, March 8**

**A much better day today now that the pastoral institute started!. About 20 pastors are here, mostly from the Gambia. George Minang, who NBS sponsored with a scholarship, is the furthest, from Cameroon. We had some doubts about the number that would show up, but the NBS Gambians promised us folks would come, and they did. Worship went well this morning and Juliana is a great master of ceremonies. The schedule is always in a state of flux, but we are growing used to it. At 4:30PM many locals came for a mini presentation of the day. Tom taught them the Healing of the Paralytic in Mark, and gave them a primer on why biblical storytelling is vital in this area. He asked the participants what percentage of Gambians are not able to read. Estimates were about 60-70 percent.. After a**



break, I led my plenary on biblical storytelling in preaching and worship. It went better than I had hoped. Dinner was provided by the Gambian Christian Council which included the Bishops of the Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches. It was a very warm and cordial gathering. We are all very tired tonight. Tomorrow will be another busy day. We begin at 7:30AM as we leave for Mother Priscilla's Anglican church for the Ash Wednesday service.

**Wednesday, March 9, 2011**

Today was an even more encouraging day. Our number of attendees is growing, particularly in the afternoon session. I led my workshop again and drew most of the young adults attending the concert. I guess I've become sort of a piper with my guitar. Some strong tellers are beginning to surface, and Tom and I hope to lead them in "how to lead a workshop" workshop tomorrow. The afternoon session was about double what it was yesterday. Thelma Thomas was a real show stopper tonight with her story telling in rap and song. George Minang from the Cameroon, whom we've sort of adopted, listened to Thelma with his mouth open in disbelief. By the way, he was worth every penny of our scholarship. His thesis was about biblical storytelling in the Cameroon, simply because he had the sense that it was the one way to communicate Scripture well to the oral culture people in Cameroon. He read 'Story Journey' and it gave him the confidence to lead a workshop. His is perhaps the only church in the Cameroon using biblical storytelling in worship. After our meetings tonight Tom, Thelma, Juliana, and I talked with Lisong Bah about how to strengthen the roots of biblical storytelling in the Gambia. A fire is started here, but it needs more fanning. We will meet this coming Wednesday to really flesh out plans for the future. With the proper support we hope that there may be a Gambian Festival Gathering next year and/or a training event for all the liturgists in biblical storytelling run by Gambians. More will follow about this. One of the things I've learned about this city is that cell phones rule. They're not only sold by vendors on the street, but if someone gets a call during a workshop or plenary they take it. Also, Facebook is prevalent here. I may go home with a whole new list of friends. Special prayers are requested for Amelia. She was laid up today with a fever. Nurse Nancy Rice is looking in on her as I write this entry. Hopefully, tomorrow she will make a turnaround.

**Thursday morning, March 10, 2011**

Again we started with worship. As the worship leader I can say that it is a joy to lead worship for these folk. They sing loudly and with gusto, sometimes even when the tune is not quite clear in the heads. I love it. Richard shared the story of Jesus' third appearance to the disciples after the resurrection in John 21. Each US teller has told a story and then reflected on its significance for their life. Nancy shares her story this afternoon. Tom shared this morning in his plenary about the development of media cultures throughout history and how important it is for us in digital culture to learn and tell the stories. He reflected on the Islamic practice of having their youth learn large portions of the Koran by heart and to pray five times a day; that it is something that we Christians could learn. De-emphasizing the learning of our Scripture by heart was a mistake that we need to correct. He also re-emphasized our need to evangelize through the telling of stories and "to encourage others to learn and tell biblical stories" as well. We moved on to workshops next. Many in this group are ready to learn how to lead a workshop and how to teach others. Tom and I will lead them in this. Richard, Nancy, Juliana, and Thelma will continue with their workshops as well. Amelia is feeling a little better this morning, but is still resting. Tonight we have dinner with Bishop Stephens of the Gambian Methodist Church at Beatrice Allen's house. I almost sent this dispatch at lunch, but I am so glad I waited. In Juliana's plenary we just had a group sharing in which each participant told the impact of this Institute on their lives and their plans for the future. We heard from people from the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Cameroon, and every story was uplifting. We heard from people raised in Muslim homes that became Christian, we heard from people raised in nonreligious homes, and people raised in Christian homes. We heard people say they didn't know what this was about, but came at someone's urging. We heard

from returnees from 3 years ago. We heard from Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. Everyone said they are excited about getting out there and telling others the stories they have learned and teaching others to learn and tell as well. We went for 2 hours hearing these stories, and it felt like it went in a few minutes. Of course, biblical stories and songs were told during this time. That is the African way. Beatrice shared more about Gambian culture with us. First, there are no words for nephew or niece, only son or daughter. One's extended family is one's family. Also, there are no cousins, just brothers and sisters

**Friday March 11, 2011**

Our Pastoral Institute ended today on a high note. First, I learned I should have been asking the Gambians to sing standing as opposed to sitting the whole time. What was I thinking, or not thinking. They really move! I was surprised that they didn't know "We Are Marching", but they do now. The morning program was mostly sharing the stories they learned over the three-four days in workshops. We heard Wolof, Swahili, and Krio versions of the stories. There are some real natural talents among them. Often they would begin and/or end their stories in song. One young woman told the genealogy and the birth account in Matthew. Dennis would have been proud. Juliana and Tom then handed out diplomas. Auntie Juliana as she is called made sure they all knew "this is serious business" and only those who were present for three days got one. Richard and I gave commissioning prayers with the laying on of hands.