



Surprised by America, surprised by God

By Vicki Sairs

Above: The Ndungu family in 2013, left to right: Naomi, Abraham, Shepherd, Danny, and Grace. (Photo credit: Doris Swartz)

Below: Naomi and Abraham in Kenya in 2006, with their children (l. to r.) Shepherd, Grace and Danny. (Photo credit: Vicki Sairs)



Editor's note: Rosedale Bible College has been blessed by a connection with Kenyan believers for more than thirty years. Over forty Kenyan students have graced RBC's campus since 1978, and many of our faculty have taught for two-week stints at Regions Beyond Ministry and the Christian Bible Institute of the CMC international affiliate Christian Church International near Thika, Kenya. Kenyans have served as guest faculty here as well. Our most recent ongoing Kenyan connection has been with the Ndungu family, who immigrated to the United States three years ago and settled in Rosedale. The following is a discussion about what it's been like for the Ndungus, three years into their American experience, with personal reflections on how that's looked to one of their friends (the author).

December 2009, Columbus International Airport, early evening: Phil and Twila Weber and my husband Reuben and I are standing outside the security checkpoint. We peer past the guard to the corridor beyond, trying to spot our friends Abraham and Naomi in the crowd of incoming passengers. Where are they?

Finally, after almost everyone else has come past the guard, we see them: they are standing in a little group, two adults and three kids, smiling at us from a distance.

Then, boom! Here comes Shepherd, the youngest, and I run to grab him. I'm not big but I pick him up and spin him around—he's so light and I'm so glad to see him. The others join us, tired and relieved and, most likely, terrified. I know I would be. They're leaving everything familiar behind and walking into a new life.

This includes walking into a frigid Ohio night. We gather their baggage and escort them out to the car, where piles of winter coats are waiting for them. I dig into the trunk, pulling jackets, hats and scarves out, distributing them as fast as I can. I turn and see that I haven't been quick enough; Naomi and Grace have draped their sweaters over their heads, unable to wait for hats.

Shepherd has pulled on a pair of gloves and is holding his hands up for inspection, staring at them with delight: "Gloves!" he says, his eyes widening. He laughs.

We drive home from the airport in two vehicles. Columbus is pretty at night, with its gentle skyscape: the Art Deco top of the Le Veque Tower lit up in red and green for Christmas, city lights reflecting on the river, highways curving, and cars gliding by in the darkness. I wonder how it looks to my friends.

Three years before, Reuben and I had landed in Nairobi, Kenya, after dark. We were scared too, even though we were only planning to stay for a few weeks. We spent our first night in the Mennonite Guest House, a lovely little place that sits in an oasis of gardens and trees. An eerie screeching woke us up in the predawn hours. We lay there, wondering what it could be. It didn't really sound like someone was being murdered, but it set off those signals in my tired brain. Traveling can do that to you.

When we got up in the morning and walked outside, dozens of ibises were traipsing around the yard, eating and screeching. Ibises! I'd only ever seen those in books I'd read to my boys when they were little. I could forgive being woken up at 3 a.m. if ibises were involved.

Our first contact with Abraham came when he arrived at the Guest House to pick us up (or 'pick us,' in Kenyan English) on Sunday afternoon. We rode in his little white car, which bounced along, handled well, and in general seemed to reflect the attitude of its driver: no denying there are these bumps in the road, but we can still be cheerful. We pulled up in front of his home, got out, and watched a slinky little mongoose slip away across the dirt driveway. Abraham seemed amused by our excitement.

Naomy greeted us as she always does now, warmly, graciously. She makes you feel as though you're the best thing that could possibly be walking through her doorway. On that day, she took me into the kitchen and talked to me as she made us chai, that Kenyan elixir. I did not know then that one day soon she would be doing the same thing in a kitchen halfway around the world, only five minutes' walk from my workplace. I didn't know how I would come to love that voice, lilting, striking a chord somewhere in my heart, soothing me.

We ate bread and butter, drank tea, and admired their *shamba*, the small plot of land behind their house that they cultivated—skillfully, joyfully, fruitfully. They raised avocados, sweet potatoes, greens—anything they could coax out of the ground. In Kenya, it didn't take much coaxing.

Eventually, we made our way to the Regions Beyond Ministry retreat center, another oasis of grace tucked into the Kenyan countryside along the Athi River. Reuben and I found ourselves in a charming cottage with a view of the trees and grass sloping down to the river. Tiny teal birds would gather outside our door in the mornings, so pretty I could hardly breathe when I watched them. I didn't want them to fly away.

Our two weeks of teaching at RBM went quickly. We loved the people we met and felt a special connection with Abraham and Naomy. Maybe it was Abraham's sense of humor; maybe it

was Naomy's voice; maybe it was their humility. I don't know.

I do know we were thrilled when we learned they were immigrating to the United States. It hasn't been an easy journey for them, although they won't tell you that. They'll tell you how faithful God has been, and that's true.

But I've been watching. I saw Abraham, a man with advanced degrees from universities on two continents, take a job washing dishes at Der Dutchman when teaching jobs dried up. I've seen Naomy, who has a master's degree in educational administration and twelve years' experience as a dean of studies at a girls' high school, do jobs that require manual labor and tasks that most of us would rather not do for others.

I've never heard them complain, although I've seen how tired they can get. And God truly has been faithful. Abraham has taught courses at RBC and leads our Kenya Cross-Cultural term; he teaches at the Ohio State University and Ohio Christian University (OCU) and is pursuing a degree at Ashland Theological Seminary. Naomy's teaching credentials have been accepted after a three-year struggle with the bureaucracies that be. She thoroughly enjoyed teaching a course in economics at OCU and looks forward to doing that again. Until then, she substitute teaches in the local schools and is looking into earning a doctor of education degree in leadership studies.

The dream: leaving Kenya to come to America

February 2012, three years into the Ndungus' American adventure: Reflecting on how he views his family's immigration experience now, Abraham explains the perspective that many people have on coming to America. "It is a place where you pursue the American dream . . . it's an opportunity for getting wealth and education." You look forward to having "freedom of expression – you can talk about the government without someone looking over your shoulder."

It's all about the bright lights of the city, he says, but "it's a different story when you get here."

While their experience "hasn't been a nightmare, as such," he acknowledges that the dream seems "elusive." At times, he wonders if it's a mirage. "But in our case," he says, "it's a bit different, because I don't think we necessarily came to 'go for the American dream.'"

"People back home think we must be making lots of money." Abraham smiles. "If we'd come with that mentality, I think we'd be very disappointed."

Although some of their Kenyan friends at home might expect them to be pursuing the goal of more money, a big house, and the good life, that is not how the Ndungus see it. They are focused on educational opportunity.

“People back home think we must be making lots of money.” Abraham smiles. “If we’d come with that mentality, I think we’d be very disappointed.”

He adds, “I am in school—God is very gracious.”

Naomy echoes his gratitude: “I am one thankful woman that Abraham is in school. This is something he wanted to do.” The last one or two years they were in Kenya, he looked for an opportunity to study in a seminary. “It’s not easy,” says Naomy.

They are thankful, too, that their children are getting a good and inexpensive education. “I’ve been happy with school for the kids,” she says. “I’ve liked the flexibility of the curriculum. I feel that they are ahead of what they’d be studying in Kenya.”

She and Abraham had been getting “very stressed with high school in Kenya,” she says. Their oldest son Danny, now 18, had already spent a couple of years at a boarding school in Kenya. He started at Fairbanks High School in Marysville as a junior when they arrived, and is now in his second year at RBC.

“That is something our hearts just love,” says Naomy. “That he’s getting a foundation.”

Grace was 13 and Shepherd was 9 when they started at Fairbanks. “It’s not easy for them to adjust, but slowly, we’re adjusting,” says Naomy.

The kids themselves give Fairbanks high scores on welcoming them. “The principal was very friendly,” says Grace. “She helped me find a friend that had most of my classes.”

Grace had never been out of Kenya. “I was excited to go somewhere different. At first, it was freezing. I was excited to see the landscape. In Kenya, there’s pretty much dust. Here, there’s no dust, just pavement – no dirt roads.”

School held some surprises. “It was different. We’d seen a lot of American movies, with some bad schools in them.” Being at school made them feel as though they were “in a movie,” although the schools they were in weren’t like the bad ones!

She especially likes the way American schools change classes (even if she sometimes can’t get there on time!). “The thing I like most is we get to see the teachers’ rooms, how they’ve decorated, how it ties into the class we’re taking.”

Shepherd started in 5th grade and recalls the carpeted floor fondly. “Even if you fell facedown, it felt nice,” he says.

Discipline is very different. Back in Kenya, says Shepherd, if you did something wrong, they would spank you with a stick. “Here, it’s detention,” he says. “That’s a big change for being punished.”

When he told his classmates this, they were shocked. “They said, ‘That’s mean, that’s cruel.’ In Kenya, I saw it as a normal thing.”

After graduating with an associate degree this spring, Danny is thinking about a degree in social work. “I feel like many (including myself) of us who call ourselves Christians have neglected the people who are ‘lower’ in society,” he says. “I’m decent with people. My ideal would be working with people.”

He says he feels his mind has shifted in the last few years. He vaguely remembers “wanting to one day own a big house and a big car,” but now he’s “okay with not having things I see on TV.” He sees that as a good change.

“At Rosedale many people are okay with not being rich—that influenced how I think.”

Tough times

Naomy talks about her struggles: It took Naomy a long time to sort out her credentials for American schools. When she couldn’t get teaching jobs, she got training as a certified nurses’ assistant (CNA) and worked the evening shift at a local nursing home. Later, she took a job providing home health care. This involved driving long distances in some scary weather; occasionally, it involved putting on what’s known in the trade as “full bug gear.”

She speaks graciously of the people she served. “I wouldn’t want to paint a picture that it’s bad. I’ve had the privilege of meeting great people. Not all the clients looked down on me.”

But there were some tricky moments. “You come to some homes,” she says, “and people look at you like you’re the lowest thing. Inside, in Naomy, I’d be [asking them], ‘Who do you think you’re handling here?’” She had to remind herself about what she knew was true: “I know I’m valuable as a child of God!”

Thinking back over her jobs, she says, “I don’t like it. I wish it was a one-day experience.” But she’s done it for two years.

“It was a slap on my face.” She claps to illustrate. “I’m so rigid. I kept feeling bad about myself. It really messed up my self-esteem.”

She shakes her head. “I am not where I should be in terms of that. I ask myself, ‘Why do you live in the past?’ That’s a prayer issue for me—that I can be able to come back to myself.” Still, she says it has been a learning experience and “a ministry opportunity.”

These experiences make her very grateful for the last six months. “I really like teaching at OCU, and I felt very good about student evaluations.” She smiles. “I am hopeful for better things.”

What about racism? Abraham refers to a course he taught at OSU on a socially just city. “The American culture is very interesting,” he says. “Because of culture, because of law, you cannot be open about racism.” It is there in

some places, he says, but it is very subtle.

“I thank God for Rosedale, that we came here first. We forget that there is racism here.” They have felt so welcomed, and that’s a comfort to them.

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“You can read it,” says Naomi. In church (London Christian Fellowship) and at Rosedale, “I am surrounded by a community of Christians who love us. That really comforts us. These are godly people, who don’t care about color.”

And the children? “Our kids haven’t had problems at school. We need to continue staying here!”

Naomy has run into racism at work. When some of her clients opened the door and saw her for the first time, they immediately asked how long she’d been working for the agency. With patience, Naomy won them over.

Church, Kenyan and American style

How about church? Both Naomy and Abraham stress that they are “blessed by being in LCF as a congregation.” They feel welcome and at home, and Abraham was recently appointed as an elder.

Yet church in Kenya is not the same. “The American church is different,” says Abraham. “It’s really different.”

Danny’s on board with shorter sermons: “That is awesome!” In Kenya, he explains, it’s not unusual to listen to an hour-long sermon, “in a hot room, with a tin roof, and you’re sitting in back, it’s packed, and the seats are benches!”

He misses some things about Kenyan worship. “We sing joyful songs here,” he says, “but we’re not actually doing what we’re singing about.” An example would be shouting, or dancing on a mountaintop. In Kenya, you might just do those things.

Abraham says that his perspective has been changed by his time in seminary. He’s learning “to appreciate people in whatever shape or style they come in.”

What he would like to see, he says, is a situation “where we are not really caged in a box . . . of tradition.” It would be wrong to refuse to experiment with change just because it’s never been done before. That way, he says, “we can allow God to surprise us.”

Five years from now?

What might be next: Speculating on where they’ll be five years from now, Abraham says, “Danny will be gone, Grace will be in her second or third year of college, and Shepherd will be a high school senior.”

Although it’s too early to say, he sees it this way: “In my own mind, when they are done with college, we will slowly

let them have freedom. We [Naomy and I] could be . . . free to be involved more and available to utilize our education.”

They think about helping with church leadership training back in Kenya. “There is still a lot that needs to be done in Kenya,” he says. Perhaps they could spend three or four months a year there, supporting ministry training—“if God gives us the opportunity to help people.” Strengthening the connections between church growth, missions and development is also close to Abraham’s heart.

Naomy agrees with those goals, and says her dream is “to pursue training in educational, organizational leadership,” earning an education doctorate.

Right now, she misses ministry opportunities. Back in Kenya, they often helped with missions in schools and colleges, and chances to witness abounded in the marketplaces and *matatus* (public transport), at work and in the community. There, she was “rubbing shoulders everyday” with other people. Here, it’s “kind of lonely.”

Finding her way to those opportunities here is another goal.



The Ndungu family “enjoying” the snow, winter 2007. (Photo credit: Vicki Sairs)

Naomy and Abraham. (Photo credit: Doris Swartz)



Final reflections

Naomy was at my house the other night, looking smart, as they say in Kenya. She had just completed an interview for a position in a graduate program that afternoon. Although she won’t know the outcome for several weeks, I expect good things for my sister. With Abraham and his family, I’m waiting to be surprised by God.