



Loving thy neighbour in hard places

New Zealander Vicki Payne reflects on a trip to Kenya in 2007.

Flying from Nairobi to Amsterdam was a shock. The taxi drove us smoothly from Schiphol airport to our in-transit hotel, where we would stay two nights until we flew back to New Zealand. We zoomed in quiet, air-conditioned comfort past large green parks, clean sidewalks, sparkling new cars. Such space, order, cleanliness – a city of seemingly complete and utter indifference that there was another place one flight away dwelling in devastating poverty.

I remembered my arrival in the Sesame Street-like airport of Nairobi. A clanging chaos of colour and noise; people everywhere wanting to be the one to carry my bags for a little bit of cash. And then on the street: the beggars, the disabled, the poor selling everything from bananas to bathroom fittings. And then at the orphanage I visited, shiny-eyed children watching as I was given a precious glass bottle of Fanta to drink – and was supposed to drink in front of them. They were so malnourished! How could I drink it in front of them?

Other events shook me. I saw a young, skinny boy with concerned eyes receive a tiny piece of food on the street, only to have it snatched out of his hand by a stout lady passing by who gave it to the baby on her back. And even when he was given more he refused to eat it straight away, but put it behind his back, risking it being stolen again. “I need to take it home for my mama,” he said.

One young boy in the countryside ran up to us and pleaded for us to take him in to an orphanage. “My grandmother beats me,” he cried. “My father and mother are dead.”

“Come back next year,” was my companion’s stiff reply. “We should have another orphanage built by then.”

We visited a slum near Kisumu, and everyone sat quietly and politely to hear what we had to say. They were as organised and polite as could be. But when the bags of rice came out, the people jumped over one another and shoved each other violently out of the way. Their hunger was too much for them.

Then there were the riots. Tribes began to attack and kill each other, and people everywhere fled for their lives. Foreigners were asked to leave the country. And the pastor and his wife and children from a church we had visited opened his tiny upstairs dwelling for all the church members to find refuge. They crowded in and sang hymns all night long.

I saw how poverty and danger and hardship can bring out the worst in people: both in the poor, and in the ones who exploit them. But it can also bring out the best in people. Those who are godly in the face of dire circumstances truly reflect the God they represent. And their actions and attitudes have the power to astound those around them who are watching, and bring them to their knees in praise of God.

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