

Christmas Greetings

2 Bd. Abbane Ramdane
Oran, Algeria

December 1986

Dear Friends,

Before this can get processed, printed, mailed and delivered to you, not only will our wishes for a blessed Thanksgiving be outdated but our Merry Christmas and Happy New Year greetings as well. Nevertheless, here they are, all wrapped in one and due to reach you after the great RUSH is over and you can relax a bit--we hope!

The first big news is that the car project is fully funded. MANY THANKS TO ALL WHO HELPED MAKE THIS POSSIBLE! If any sent in gifts after the project was completed, they will receive a request to redesignate their gift. For that, they can choose ANY approved Advance Special Project. If that happens to anyone who does not have some other project immediately in mind, let us suggest Advance Special Project #008610-0 R-A (Program Fund for World Division Personnel in North Africa).

The big family news is Carol's lightning-style trip to the States and back in May. Her parents were selected as the "Family of the Year" at Baker University (United Methodist school in Kansas). They graduated from Baker exactly 60 years ago last May. Then their two children (Carol and her sister) and their other son-in-law also graduated from Baker. More recently, four boys have been making a wave through the same school. Our third son was graduating in May and number four will be finishing next May. Baker was inviting the whole clan, and Grandfather Platt was offering the airplane tickets to get the two of us there from Algeria--yes, including David, the odd-man out, who graduated from Central Methodist College in Missouri! It proved impossible for David to get away, but we finally managed it for Carol to be gone 10 days (eight in the states). As you can imagine, the great weekend of ceremonies was a delightfully hectic whirlwind of activities. The frustration accompanying it was the lack of time for visiting with those members of the family who were able to be there just for the two days of ceremonies. Carol was able to divide the rest of her time between her parents and the three younger sons.

Now we'd like to share with you a bit in terms of "introducing" you to a couple of former parishioners. But first let us explain the situation we stepped into on arriving in Oran in 1975. A few years before that, the old French Reformed Church and our former United Methodist Church in this country had united to form the ecumenically oriented "Protestant Church of Algeria." The new name was chosen to indicate our openness to, and our desire to serve, any and all Protestants who might happen to be in Algeria, whatever their denominational origin. Already before that, in the 1960's, the overwhelming majority of Christians born here or living here as long-term residents had left for France or elsewhere. Our small Methodist group in Oran had all gone. The French Reformed pastor had stayed on. Then he also left in 1973. For two years, a small group of Protestants was held together by the initiative of a layman from New Zealand--English teacher at the university but apparently fairly competent in French as well. At first we both taught English at the university while also serving the few Protestants whose names and addresses had been given to us. We found only three families, one other couple and another woman--all French or Swiss. In one family the father was Catholic, and the family alternated attendance between our services and the mass.

Now enter H.M. (February 1976). He was a young man from Cameroon in pilot training at the air school some 15 miles south of Oran. He did not know there was a Protestant group in the city: we cannot publicize ourselves here and were

not very "visible" since we had not yet regained access to our old 1916 Methodist church building. We were meeting in a room annexed to the Catholic diocesan library graciously made available to us by the Catholic bishop.

H.M.'s desire for Christian fellowship was already strong, and then he received word of his mother's death and the difficult situation of his younger brother and sister back home. He wrote to the capital city, Algiers, where he had an uncle in that parish. So, from Algiers he learned of our presence in Oran and wrote to us. In that initial letter, he told us that he was seeking Christian fellowship and that the most precious heritage his mother had left him was his faith in, and love for, Jesus Christ. He wanted to nourish that faith and love. So he joined our community and soon began bringing along a half dozen other Cameroon students studying at the Institute of Petrochemical Studies. That was the beginning of our ministry to African students from south of the Sahara. Since then, we've had students from 14 African countries. At present most of our students are from the Malagasy Republic (Madagascar).

The beginnings of that continuing ministry constituted only part of H.M.'s legacy to us. He was also a song leader. From memory he sang and taught us most of the musical liturgical responses of his home church. The words were French but the music African. We are still using those songs today though we have had no more Cameroon students since that first group left in 1978.

His legacy of music has made it possible for us to help "liven up" some of our ecumenical meetings, as well: ecumenical African Christian student group, week of prayer for unity, etc. Shortly after we started using them--while the Cameroon students were still here--we sang some of them at a meeting of our ecumenical Bible group. The cooperating priest and one of his parishioners immediately commented that we must come sing them at mass someday to help "wake up" their people. H.M. and the other African students did just that, using local Algerian hand drums as tom-toms. As well as "waking up" the congregation and "livening up" the mass, they succeeded in earning the gratitude of the whole parish.

Another of our early African student contacts was P.B. from Chad. He had first spent a year in Algiers. Living in university housing at the edge of the city, he rarely went to the center. He did not even know that there was a Protestant church there. He and one other Protestant student met regularly for Bible reading and prayer in their rooms. He had no other Christian fellowship. Then he came to Oran and was again out at the edge of the city and continued his own Bible reading and prayer without any Christian fellowship at all. It was fairly near the end of the school year before he learned of our existence.

That year the Catholics had named a White Father as chaplain for their African students. They had pretty well neglected them till they saw what was happening in our Protestant parish. In the spring, the White Father and David organized a general gathering for all African Christian students, asking the known contacts to spread the word among their fellow African in all the various university-level institutes around the city. That was the first clue P.B. had that there was any kind of functioning Christian community here. He came, met David and the Protestant African students--as well as the Catholic ones, of course--and became a much-beloved member of our church family.

But P.B. soon had a problem: our close ecumenical fellowship here. The American Protestant missionaries who had worked in his part of Chad had succeeded in convincing their parishioners that Catholics are not really Christians at all. That, of course, was a reverse twist of the official Catholic view of Protestants before the second Vatican Council (1962-65). This, however, was in the late 70's; and still Catholics and Protestants in his area had not begun to seek any mutual understanding. We had more than one occasion to speak

with him about the important convictions that still divide us but also about the fundamental convictions that we share. Even more important than these conversations were his own contacts with individual Catholics here: fellow African students, priests, nuns and others. It was through these close personal relationships that he came to understand and appreciate the truly Christian nature of their faith. Many of the prejudices he had absorbed about them proved to be quite false. He left as fervent a Protestant as ever but with a firm determination to help develop Protestant-Catholic relations in his area. Much to his delight, he discovered that such contacts had begun--barely--during his absence. He would do all he could to help further them, promoting a better understanding of real differences in a context of brotherly love.

While he was still among us in Oran, his country was sinking deeper and deeper into the pit of multi-factional strife. Nevertheless, he was always pleasant, with a reassuring smile, radiating a certain warmth of peace, joy and friendship. It was his inner life of faith bubbling over.

By the time he returned home, his country was being torn to shreds, government agencies were not functioning and he could not take the job for which he had been trained and for which he held an engineering degree. His family lived on the land in a predominantly rural area far from the fighting, so he helped work the land and keep the family fed. He was the eldest of a large family so he also served as school teacher for his siblings. Meanwhile, he established contact with relatives just across the border in Cameroon to see if he could get a job in that country to put his engineering skills to use. As a foreigner in that country, he had no priority and could not get hired.

At the end of the first year back home, he got married. He shared the news with us by letter and was very happy. About six months later, his wife, who was then in the fourth month of pregnancy, began to hemorrhage seriously. They managed to get her into a hospital in Cameroon, where she spent six weeks. In the eighth month the hemorrhaging returned. He took her back to the hospital but they lost both wife and child.

Nothing improved in other areas either. In fact, the general situation in war-torn Chad deteriorated even further; and, even though he took up temporary residence with a cousin in Cameroon, he was still unable to get employment. His occasional letters assured us that his faith sustained him through all. We have now been without news for a couple of years, but we keep him in our prayers and trust that his inner life of faith continues to overflow. May it be so with you as well.

Fraternally yours,

THE BUTLERS--David & Carol