

October 15, 2012

To our surprise there were churches in Cana. Two, to be exact: a Catholic church, and a Tanzania Assembly of God church. When we visited the TAG congregation one Sunday we discovered a cement block building high up on an isolated hill. The government had granted them a plot of land far from the town's thoroughfare. No one in the village could just casually "pass by" and glance in the windows or linger to hear what was going on. The small congregation was mostly women and children, but we were encouraged to realize that a few of them were actually converts from Islam. After the service, an elderly man about half Colin's height came and invited us to come eat dinner at his house that week. "I'll come get you and show you the way there," he reassured us.

Fred escorted us a few days later to their homestead. Coconut and fruit trees grew in profusion. They obviously farmed the land, growing rice and maize, beans and garden vegetables. The large barn-sized house that Fred had built was unusual for that area. We had noticed that all the houses in the village were about the same 800 square foot size. But this was much, much larger, with a high, raised roof. To our surprise they had a dining table with chairs. Hung over it from the rafters was a flashlight, which they turned on after it got dark, so it shed a small dim circle of light on our food as we ate.

Epiphany, Fred's wife, was younger than he. He told us the story of growing up Catholic. Then Fred heard a preacher and got saved. Epiphany was already a believer. He was a head teacher at the local primary (elementary) school for many years, till he retired. They had six sons, the oldest two married and the youngest one, named Emmanuel, still just preschool age. Shyly the younger sons came to greet us, shaking each of our hands and saying hello.

When it came time to eat, Epiphany gave us a feast. Rice and chicken with coconut-tomato sauce. Sliced papaya for dessert. Handwashing over a basin before and after the meal. Fred ate with us but Epiphany and the kids did not. She sat nearby in a dim corner and joined in the conversation. This felt awkward to us but we realized later it was a sign of respect to let the guests eat first, and then be satisfied with leftovers for herself and her children.

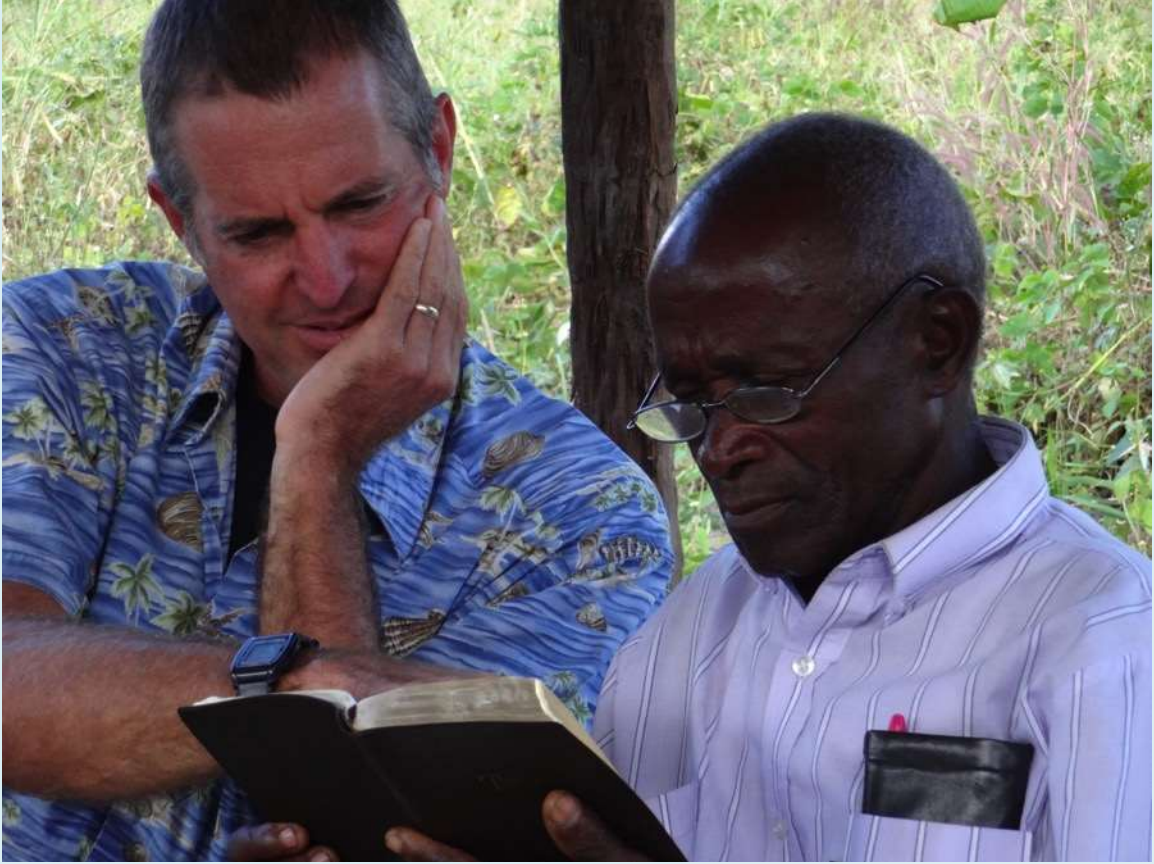
Fred was elderly but still very strong physically. He had a passion for Jesus, education, farming and community development...in that order. Epiphany was also very friendly. They began stopping by our house to chat from time to time. It became obvious Fred was highly respected in the community for his good character and service. Epiphany liked to bring me a gift of fruit, vegetables or grain. Once, though, she brought me a gift wrapped up in a black plastic bag. She unwrapped it surreptitiously, revealing a piece of blackened pork.

This was a dilemma for me. Early in our time in the village we realized one of the things Muslims most objected to about Christians was that we ate pork, something

abhorrent to them. It's like an American being offered dog's meat. Most of the villagers believed that eating pork was an obligatory part of the practice of Christianity. When we understood, we determined we would not let pork-eating stand between our Muslim neighbors and us. For the three years we were in the village, we decided, our team would not eat pork. We did this partly to remove barriers to friendship. A bigger reason, however, was to remove barriers to their accepting Jesus. Maybe, we reasoned, if they knew it was possible to become a believer in Christ yet not have to eat pork, they would be more likely to consider putting their faith in Him.

When Epiphany showed me the piece of pork, I did not want to hurt her feelings by turning it down. But I knew there was no way I could accept it. "Ah, pork. I'm so sorry, thank you so much for offering it, but we are not eating pork these days," I blurted out lamely. She looked a bit surprised, but not offended. She shrugged, calmly covered it back up and put it away.

Fred and Epiphany became some of our best friends. Fred had the attitude from the beginning that we were partners in ministry. Throughout our years in Cana, Fred and Epiphany never wavered in their public identification with us and with our team. It was always their desire to see the Lord Jesus lifted up as the one true Savior, God in the flesh.



Above: Colin and Fred read Scripture together.

Below: Fred in the white shirt, his wife Epiphany to the left in the blue shawl. Praising Jesus in song at their country farm.

