



Brandell e-Scr@pbook

A monthly report on our life in Vanuatu



In this month's issue...

Over the past few months we have mentioned the fact that we have been dealing with some problems here in Vila. The time has come to provide some details regarding those problems, as they have reached a serious level.

You'll also find a brief update on Titus, some good news regarding conversions that took place in December, information on the teacher-training seminar Shawnda was asked to conduct in Etas Village, and pics from the Vila Ladies' Christmas party.

From the home-front...

This was a great month here at the Brandell house. Titus is growing and changing every day. He is already showing a distinct personality. This month he had a lot of "firsts." He had his first Christmas, his first smile in response to Eric and me, his first doctor's visit, his first hospital stay and his first laugh. We are blessed beyond measure and thank God for Titus daily.

Most of you know that Titus had to stay three nights in the hospital due to an infection. It was a tough time for us all, but he's well now and back to normal. We are thankful for the doctors who took care of him.

Eric and I love being parents! It's an absolute dream come true. We received a sweet card in the mail that said, "The dream that you had in your hearts you now hold in your arms." That's exactly how we feel. We are blessed.



We love you all.
- Shawnda

PORT VILA UPDATE

The underlying purpose of our monthly update is to effectively communicate with our supporters regarding our work. Naturally, we are inclined to focus on the positive aspects of that work, but we also realize that focusing exclusively on the positives would not qualify as effective communication. Too, when we consider the experiences of the Old Testament prophets (I am especially reminiscent of Ezekiel's need to have a forehead like emery, harder than flint...Ezekiel 3:8-9) and the content of Paul's epistles we see that mission work often has as many downs as ups. Most of the problems we are dealing with have been a direct or an indirect result of the building project. At present, there are two main issues: [1] three men and their families refuse to worship with the congregation at the new building until it is completed and subsequently "dedicated" according to local custom (a large meal and associated ceremony), and [2] accusations that I stole money from the building fund.



First, with the completion of the roofing on the building Shem Gabriel (a “leader” in the Vila church) suggested to me that we go ahead and begin worshipping in the building. The move was made based on the following points of logic: [1] Shem’s suggestion, [2] the church in Epau Village had recently begun meeting in their new building before it was completed (which incidentally was never “dedicated”), [3] the church was currently meeting in a public hall that rented for approx. 56USD per week (the team and the congregation splitting the cost), [4] the church was constructing a building for the purpose of meeting in it, and though it wasn’t finished, it was suitable to meet in (well-lit, protected from the elements, etc.), [5] meeting at the building would enable many Christians to walk to worship (several of whom often did not come because they lacked money for transportation), and [6] the assumption that the congregation would be excited to get into “a place of our own” (the public hall was also the meeting place of several very-distracting [loud] denominations). The two other “leaders” in the congregation, Stephen Felix and Gomon Mesa, were adamantly opposed to the move, though they did not voice their opposition until after the move was made (by boycotting services). Shem, though originally in favor of the move, quickly jumped ship to fall in line with Stephen and Gomon. When asked why they were opposed, through a line of reasoning we do not understand, they proclaim that they fasted and prayed for a church building in Vila, and therefore personally refuse to worship in it until it is completed. Attempts to reason with them that it is simply impossible to yield to the personal inclinations of everyone (in every area of life) have failed. Additionally, there is a dedication ceremony that often takes place with regard to a new church building. We were vaguely familiar with this custom, but had not waited on it for several reasons (which have been offered by both us and local Christians): [1] Shem’s suggestion and Epau’s example made it clear that the custom wasn’t always adhered to, [2] meeting in the building for worship for a month or two would not prevent the congregation from having such an opening once the building was completed, [3] the custom seems contra-biblical, having denominational roots rather than cultural (i.e. it seems to answer the question, at what point does a secular building become “the sanctuary?”). They have emphasized on several occasions that their opposition is based on personal preference and not custom.

On Sunday, September 17, 2006, we began meeting in the new building. Shem, Stephen, Gomon and their families have not worshiped with us since that time. In public and private meetings with these men, they have emphasized that they are not opposed to us (the mission team and all the new Christians) worshipping at the building, but that they simply choose not to until it is completed and “dedicated.” However, never seeing each other and not worshipping together naturally causes a rift – an “us against them” mentality. Since we are seen as the leaders of “the other group,” tension is created. The immaturity of these men is revealed by the fact that they are unwilling to overlook their personal preferences for the good of the congregation.

Second, I was recently accused of stealing money from the building fund. I was selected as our team’s liaison for the building project when we divided up our 2006 work. By default, I became the “foreman” on the project when no locals accepted the task. There are far too many details to try and explain all that has happened to result in these accusations being made. The source of the accusations can be broken down into three parts: [1] a few individuals have a personal problem with me and want to degrade my character, [2] near the completion of the project, I used money from my personal work fund to purchase materials, and subsequently reimbursed myself from the building fund. Both Mike and Antony Raine (a Christian in New Zealand who was responsible for raising the funds for the building project) knew about these transactions, and [3] I was asked (against my better judgment) to give a status report on the building project in the presence of several Christians. It was against my better judgment because we were talking about dollar amounts that most of the men present could not even fathom (I voiced my hesitancy, but was persuaded to proceed). During the meeting one of the men present made the statement, “this building should not cost 4 million vatu” (the amount raised for the project). Quite frankly, this man has absolutely no clue how much a building should cost. Rather, as I feared some would, he simply sees 4 million vatu [approx 37,000USD] as an outrageous amount, and thinks you should be able to build a five-star hotel with that much money. Some have made similar conclusions, and the men who know better have chosen not to speak up in my defense



(specifically Stephen Felix and Gomon Mesa, whose names are on the building fund bank account along with mine). I want to assure you that I did not steal any money, nor have I done anything that should be considered questionable. I have made available records of every vatu that was spent, along with the associated receipts for each transaction that was made.

Perhaps worst of all is the fact that the building project, which seems to be the crux of the matter, is currently at a standstill since Gomon and Stephen refuse to sign a withdrawal slip for me to continue work. Thus, the project is in their hands, and no progress has been made in almost a month. There also seems to be an element that is seeking to force us to exit Vanuatu because of these and other issues.

Though this report is fairly lengthy, there are numerous other details that space, time and relevancy simply do not allow me to discuss. I wish to communicate that we have absolutely nothing to hide, and welcome any questions that you may have regarding either of these two issues. We do not claim to have done everything perfectly, but promise that we are doing our best. As a mission team, we are more discouraged than we have ever been. Please join us in praying that these issues will be resolved, that truth will prevail, and that much good can be accomplished in 2007. -EB

TITUS TAYLOR

We endured our first hospital stay this month, as Titus was admitted to the Children's Ward of the public hospital here in Vila because of a bacterial infection. Spending three nights in a third-world hospital was interesting to say the least. The antibiotics were effective in fighting off the infection, and we're happy to say that Titus has made a complete recovery.



Titus celebrated his one-month birthday on the 24th of this month. His first checkup went well, and he is growing as he should, eating and sleeping well. He enjoyed Christmas, especially the lights on the tree, which he would contently stare at for several minutes at a time. You can read lots more about Titus' daily life and see photos galore by visiting his website at www.missionvanuatu.com/brandell/titus.

We were not able to make any headway on legalizing Titus' adoption this year, as the holiday season prevented us from accessing many government agencies. We hope to get things underway near the start of the new year. Please be praying that the process will go quickly and smoothly. -EB

DECEMBER CONVERSIONS



You may recall my mentioning Claude in last month's scrapbook. Following a few more studies this month, Claude was baptized into Christ on December 5. We took a break for the holidays, but plan to begin studying together once again each Tuesday night in January. Claude is well-educated and a good speaker. He has already begun leading prayers in our worship services.

Mike also taught and baptized two men in Etas Village this month, Morgan and Peter. You can read more about these three conversions on the website at www.missionvanuatu.com/conversions/home. -EB





TRAINING TEACHERS IN ETAS VILLAGE

During their 2007 planning meeting, the congregation in Etas Village (just north of Port Vila town) decided that they would like to begin conducting a children’s Bible class on Sunday mornings before worship. Like so many other village congregations, Etas enjoys the presence of several local children each Sunday, even though the children’s parents do not attend.

But Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14)



Two women volunteered to teach the classes, and asked me to come one Saturday morning and teach them how to be effective. Salome was unable to attend the training session, but Leimawa seemed to really appreciate the time we spent together. I prepared several handouts outlining some ideas for teaching a lesson, reviewing a lesson, teaching general Bible facts, teaching books of the Bible, and songs. While we went through the handouts I demonstrated my ideas with some material that I brought. At the end of the training session, I presented them with some Bible class materials, handouts, and visual aids. I hope that this training session proved beneficial to Leimawa and will ultimately benefit the children’s Biblical training in Etas. -SB

LADIES’ DECEMBER FELLOWSHIP: CHRISTMAS PARTY



We had our annual ladies Christmas party at our house again this year. The women here in Vila like to get together in December to “close out” the weekly ladies fellowships with a party. As they have done in years past, we drew names and exchanged presents. This year was special because we had several visitors who wanted to participate. It is encouraging to see the Christian women reaching out to their family and friends. I hope that through informal fellowships like this we can get to know these women and eventually begin studying with them. That said, the Christmas party was a success. -SB

