

The tale of a transplanted teacher

Prayerful obedience

As I read the email, the depth of my incredulity increased with every line. The reason for my disbelief was a request that I pray about the possibility of leaving Carachipampa Christian School (CCS) in Bolivia for a year to help out at Sahel Academy, a school owned by my mission, SIM (Serving in Mission), in Niger, West Africa. It was only eight months since I had returned to Bolivia from home assignment in the UK and the prospect of having to pack up my belongings yet again was *not* an inviting one.

I arrived at CCS as a science teacher in 1991, became headteacher in 1997 and Bolivia has become my home. I produced a long list of sensible and perfectly valid reasons why I could not possibly leave Cochabamba to go to an unknown school in a totally alien culture on another continent. Despite this, I felt it only right to pray about the request, only to discover that, as I prayed, the Lord began to work in my heart! I slowly became more and more convinced that God *did* want me in Niger, although this was not what I wanted at all. It was with grudging obedience that I replied to the email and said that, if no other person could be found, I would be willing to spend a year as interim principal of Sahel Academy. So July saw me on an Air France flight heading for Niamey, Niger, with many apprehensions but a certainty that I was obeying God's will, even if I wasn't exactly joyful in my obedience!

New challenges

Although Carachipampa Christian School and Sahel Academy are both schools that exist primarily for the education of the children of missionaries (MKs), there are many differences between them. CCS

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Mosques are everywhere in Niger

began in 1926 and is a day school, with a small satellite in the city of Sucre. There are 230 students, half of whom are Bolivians. Sahel Academy was established in 1986. It has only 65 students (15 of these boarding on the campus) and no Nigerien students. CCS has an international curriculum, offering its school leavers a North American style diploma as well as the Bolivian Matriculation. Sahel Academy has a similar programme, but also offers the IGCSE through the University of Cambridge.

A week before I arrived in Niamey, after I had left Bolivia, I discovered that, due to lack of an alternative, I was going to have to teach *all* the high school science! I was horrified. This meant a double workload – and besides, I had left my teaching files (from 15 years of teaching science) in Cochabamba. Of course, God knew best: teaching all the high school students meant that I got to know them better and more quickly than I would if I'd sat in the principal's office all day. I grew to love the young people that came daily to the laboratory for lessons and I count it a privilege to have been able to help with their education.

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New experiences

Many adventures were mine during my months in Niger. These included: seeing giraffes, elephants and hippos in the wild; inability to communicate (other than in very broken French with an occasional Spanish word slipping out); learning of life and culture in a Muslim country; and visiting Hausa churches, where men sit with men and women with women. I enjoyed the enthusiastic singing, accompanied by the rhythm of African drums. One of my most unusual experiences – one that I am not sure I would wish to repeat – was camel riding. Camels are an everyday sight in Niamey, as they plod through the streets with heavy loads on their backs. One day, I joined five other teachers on a camel trek out into the bush. I was nervous when I saw just how tall the camels were! Despite this, I made the ride. The scenery was stark but beautiful – green and orange, the colours of the Nigerien flag, being the predominant shades.

I arrived in Niger in the rainy season, when it is much more humid than the rest of the year. I am used to heat, but Cochabamba is very dry, so I was not accustomed to the energy-sapping humidity of the lowland tropics. What worried me most was that the folk kept saying things like, ‘when it gets hot’ and ‘when the hot season arrives’. It stretched my credulity to imagine that it was going to be hotter than it was! Niger is a harsh place to live, on many counts. The climate is excessively hot and the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables available is very small, compared to the abundance of Cochabamba, the ‘garden city’. When the hot season did arrive, with afternoon temperatures of up to 50°C (120°F), I found it very hard to maintain



Staff and students of Sahel Academy



Why buy pots when you can make your own?



Ann riding a camel

my routines – especially when night time temperatures rarely dropped below 35°C, thus making for restless sleeping.

And the Lord was in it all

Despite my prior misgivings, it proved to be a wonderful year in Niger. I learned so much from the opportunity to work in a new school and learn how different, yet similar, MK schools can be. Unlike CCS, Sahel Academy has a boarding hostel or ‘dorm’ so I was able to see how positive an experience boarding can be, when the dorm is well run and an integral part of the school. It was also valuable to experience the IGCSE programme in action and have opportunity to examine the possibility of this for CCS, in order to meet the needs of our British and Commonwealth families.

Once again, I have to admit that the Lord’s plans are the best! Before I left Bolivia, God gave me a verse to which I referred time and again throughout my months at Sahel Academy:

‘And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.’

(2 Corinthians 9: 8)

I went to Africa grudgingly; God gave abundantly. I went out of duty; God gave joy and a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. He is indeed ‘able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine’!

■ Ann Christian

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