

HAMA

It's a time and a place of unknowns. I'm in Africa. Africa! I've just ridden along roads dusty with red clay, through avenues lined with baobab trees, along acres of tea leaves. And I've just met Charles. Charles and I have been pen pals for about five years now, having randomly selected each other from "Dear Friend" letters sent through a partnership between churches in Brentwood-Kingston, NH, and Gwenzi, Zimbabwe. And now we (12 persons from New Hampshire) are visiting Zimbabwe!

It's exciting. It's a little unsettling. Everything here is so different. It's not just the obvious differences in climate (temperature, landscape, wildlife) and people (skin color, culture, daily life). It's the unspoken and unobserved differences: What do they really think of me? Have I done anything to offend them? How can I be grateful without being condescending, when I have so much and they have so little?

And so I was thrilled and yet more than a little nervous when Charles announced, with a smile that filled his whole face, that Bart (my husband) and I would be guests in their home for the next four nights. We knew that we were being hosted by local families, and we had no idea who was staying with whom. But we rather expected the more well-to-do tea plantation owners and managers to be the ones to offer their homes. And some did. Charles and his wife Juliet are teachers and live in government-provided houses; their salary at the time we visited was the equivalent of about \$40 per month (each). They are well-educated and proud of their profession. Yet their entire house, which was also home to their three children and a niece, would easily fit into less than half of the floor space on one level of our house.

We were dropped off from the rickety mini-van that had been our means of transport; the others in our group were also taken to their respective host homes. We were alone with our hosts. Charles and his family may have been nervous about meeting and hosting us, but one would never know it. They graciously welcomed us into their home, took our suitcases to their sons' room, where we would sleep, and proceeded to show us the rest of the house.

It didn't take much time; there were only two more rooms and their bedroom, besides the hallway/cooking alcove through which we had entered. Suddenly my eyes were riveted, drawn to a photo collage hanging in the place of honor in the main room. It was a framed collection of snapshots, taken of Charles and Juliet and their children – perhaps 12-15 photos in all. And prominently among them, mixed in with the rest, were photos of US. They were random photos taken over the past five years – of Bart and me, of our children, even of our dog. I turned to look at Charles, and he said, almost, matter-of-factly, "Of course your pictures are here. You are our hama." *

All of my apprehensions of a few moments ago were gone. How humbling. How life-giving. Of course we were hama. The differences which could have separated us seemed so insignificant. Our friendship had just moved to an infinitely deeper level. It was a portent to the

wonderful days that were to follow – days in which we received so much more than we had ever given and learned so much more than we had ever taught. Hama – now not “just” a word, but a whole new way of looking at life.

* “family” in the Shona language

Doris Noyes

Pilgrim United Church of Christ Brentwood-Kingston - paired with Gwenzi UCCZ, Gwenzi, Zimbabwe

Traveled to Zimbabwe in 2007