

A Letter from Michelle

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Dear Friends.

I have just returned from a two day trip to Solwezi, a town that is 112 miles away from Mukinge. The road to Solwezi is deteriorating what used to take two hours now takes three and a half! Some of the road has been fixed (mysteriously in one place just on one side of the road) but as fast as they fix it other parts get worse. In some places it's easier to drive on the dirt beside the road and in some you just have stop and decide which pothole looks like it will cause least damage to your car and pick that one to drive through!



There really is not a lot between Mukinge and Solwezi but the countryside is beautiful and there is an array of things you can buy from the roadside including mangos, watermelons, tomatoes, charcoal by the sack full, black-market petrol and raw honey in 2.5 litre containers. You always pass a lorry or two that has broken down, the drivers camp next to their vehicle while waiting for someone to come and fix it or a spare part to arrive, often they are there for days.



Solwezi itself is a busy, rapidly expanding mining town close to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is the provincial and administrative capital of North Western Province and the nearest place to us with a supermarket. The main street is chaotic with lots of vehicles including mining trucks, busses, cars, motorbikes, men pushing wheelbarrows and the occasional goat, side roads are mostly dirt with water filled holes. My reason for going was to renew my car insurance, pay road tax for next year, get my car's annual "fitness test" and of course do a bit of Christmas shopping. I spent a lot of the time in queues in offices, shops and to get money out of the ATM, experience has taught me to carry a book to read for those extra-long queues.

Here in rural Zambia there is not a long build up to Christmas and apart from in the supermarket where there was a tree, decorations and Christmas music you would not have known it is less than week away. As there are no carol services in the build up to Christmas here, I took the opportunity of a long drive alone in the car to blast out carols and Christmas songs and sing along.

As I shopped for food both for Christmas and to last until I next go to a supermarket (February) the supermarket was full of people with full trolleys and I was struck by the huge gap between the haves and the have nots here in Zambia. The recent drought has meant that many do not have enough to eat this year and because they had no maize to sell last season, they can't afford fertilizer to grow

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this year's maize. The malnutrition side of the children's ward is full to overflowing and we have had several children die from malnutrition recently. It is always hard to see a child die from something that is preventable and to have that sense of helplessness at not being able to prevent it or change the outcome. However, I have to remind myself that for every child that dies many more go home. One such child was Mike (name changed) who was admitted with severe malnutrition and anaemia needing three blood transfusions during his stay. There were several evenings when I went home not expecting to see him in the morning but with lots of care and special feeds and nutritional supplements he recovered and went home. These photos show him early on in his admission and on discharge day.



The good news is that this season's rains have started, and people have planted their crops which are growing. We pray that the rains will continue, and next year's harvest will be a good one.

What will you be doing for Christmas? On Christmas Eve we will have the hospital staff Christmas party followed by singing Kaonde carols on the wards and the sharing of a Christmas message. On Christmas day we will have a team picnic on Christmas afternoon followed by a campfire with hot chocolate, desserts and gifts. I hope that whatever you are doing and wherever you are you have a lovely Christmas

Looking ahead, next year it is time for my Home Assignment again. I plan to be in the UK from April to September and am looking forward to seeing many of you and visiting supporting churches. Let me know if you want to get together.

Happy Christmas

With love

Michelle