

Moving on, Following God's direction at BCS

The past few years at Bourofaye Christian School in Senegal have been turbulent ones. Civil insurrection in the Casamance region had smouldered and periodically ignited for several years before the enforced evacuation in 1997. The school staff seriously considered evacuation back in 1992/93 in the previous worst wave of fighting, but sat tight after prolonged prayer and fasting which involved the older children as well as the staff. The decision to stay was vindicated when calm was restored after the security forces restored order, but the underlying tension did not go away. A new round of guerrilla action and counter-offensive began in June 1997 which did not “settle down” to the prevailing uneasy calm, but rather escalated to the point where there was no choice but to leave. August 1997 thus found BCS without a safe school site and contemplating a very uncertain future. Severe disruption to the children’s education seemed inevitable, but miraculously a new “temporary” site was found in Keur Massar on the edge of Dakar. The disused Bible College site was dilapidated and dirty, having been out of use in the dusty Sahel for almost 2 years. Several weeks of determined effort and commitment way beyond the call of duty on the part of the staff saw the school ready to receive the children only two weeks after the scheduled start of the academic year. An exile there that was originally meant to take up just one school term eventually stretched to five years. All the time our staff and families involved in the school had to pray and fast to try to find out what God had for the future. The decision not to return to the original site had to be made, painful but inevitable, given the continuing low-level guerrilla warfare in the area. If it could not go back there, what would we do next?

After several false starts, even including building surveys, the Lord opened up the new site at Kiniabour, close to the “Petite Côte” tourist zone south of Dakar in October 2001. It was several months before the official building permission was granted by the Senegalese authorities, so the construction work did not begin until the beginning of March 2002, although the plans had already been made. The challenge to have the school ready to open for the 2002/2003 academic year was enormous and not made any easier by the delay in bringing electricity to the site. This meant that water had to be bought in by the tanker load, as the builders couldn’t pump it from the well. Despite the difficulties, the staff there have made a phenomenal effort, and had enough buildings ready to open the school for the IGCSE class only 2 weeks after the original scheduled date. They were greatly helped in this by many volunteer teams, including skilled workers who have roofed, plumbed, welded and wired to get the buildings ready. Less skilled volunteers helped in the enormous school move through July and August. The academic year began for the rest of the children at the end of October, meaning that the start was delayed by half a term (one sixth of the school year). Some of this “lost” time will be recouped throughout the rest of the school year. Given the logistics of moving the school again and the many frustrating delays forced on the team, this is a considerable achievement.



When faced with the choice of opening up with the school still as a building site or of delay, the school committee chose to go ahead and open up. Having faced the cramped and basic conditions at Keur Massar for the sake of the children’s education, they were willing to do it again. Last month Steve was privileged to revisit the school where we taught from 1990 – 2001 in its new home. He went at the request of our church in the UK to accompany a team of skilled workers who had volunteered to help out at the building site. We found the school up and running, with

about half of the necessary buildings usable if not entirely finished. Our team helped bring another large building a long way towards readiness by roofing it and wiring it up. The team also wired up other buildings and welded up burglar bars, as well as adding one or two finishing touches to some of the buildings already in use. It was great to spend time with the children and staff at the school and to see the sense of expectancy and excitement as the project to create a purpose-built site progresses. Despite the crowded conditions at the moment, the morale is good as they see the Lord provide for this development, knowing that there have been some very specific answers to prayer as the work has gone ahead. The children have prayed in faith, having joined in with days of prayer and fasting and met in the “powerhouse” prayer room set aside for intercession and praise, and have seen that faith rewarded by a faithful God.

What comes next for BCS? As the mission families in the area have seen the school relocated to Kiniabour, a number of them have applied to send their children there and have already sent them or are waiting for the right time. The fact that the school offers an education endorsed by the Zurich Canton for the German speakers and is a registered centre with both the UK government and Cambridge University for the English speakers makes it attractive to a wide range of nationalities. Its policy on internationalisation ensures that a sensitive response to all of the children’s educational needs can be made. BCS has thought through its purpose again and has taken on board new initiatives and remains open to others as the need arises, given that there are the staff available to see them through. New initiatives are

- The adoption of a more flexible boarding arrangement to make weekly and fortnightly boarding possible has helped open up the school to those outside of a realistic distance for daily attendance yet not wanting to opt for the whole term arrangement.
- Opening up to part-time attendance to allow children to have contact with their peers and continue home education.
- Building close enough to Dakar airport to allow children to fly in from further afield than was previously possible. This widens the school’s area to include other West African countries as well as Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal.
- Allowing the school to be used as an examination centre for Cambridge International Examinations by external candidates.

There are other possibilities for the future such as links with other schools so that they could feed older students into the BCS system; short courses for home educated children, being a base for peripatetic teachers who would work with small co-ops and individual families. In the fast changing world of MK education these are things that many of our specialist schools are doing or considering for the near future.

We know that many schools have taken these and other initiatives and have seen them in action for some years, we’d like to hear about them and include these ideas in the next edition in March – so please write and tell us about what you know is happening.

Troubled Times at VIS

Côte d’Ivoire is currently in a deep crisis. Soldiers about to be demobilised staged a well-organised coup attempt, which did not oust the government but did put large swathes of the country under their domination. The country is now effectively split in two with the rebels finding a degree of support in the Muslim-dominated north and government forces still in control in the south. The International Christian Academy in Bouaké made news around the world when students and staff were caught up in crossfire and were only evacuated after several days following the intervention of the French army. The town of Vavoua is close to the dividing line and has been the centre of recent fighting as government troops have attempted to dislodge the rebels holding it. Even as I write the situation could well be changing, and who knows what new developments will unfold before you read this. The school there was forced to evacuate as the threat of trouble came ever closer, eventually leaving at short notice on the 4th

October late in the afternoon. Their evacuation was eventful, to say the least, with flat tyres, vehicles refusing to start and an enforced stopover at a village church en route. Eventually they made it down to Abidjan where they attempted to retain a semblance of normality by running the school at the mission centre there. It soon became obvious that the situation would not be quickly resolved, and that trying to run a school which catered for children from all around Côte d'Ivoire and its neighbours was not a realistic option for the rest of the school year. The difficult, but inevitable, decision was made to close down for the rest of the school year. Some of the children have gone back home to Mali to continue their education as best possible at home. Two of the staff members have gone with them to help with home tutoring. Other children are still in Abidjan and the remainder – mostly the top senior children coming up to IGCSE exams – have transferred across to BCS. They are being housed in rented accommodation near to the school site because of the tight squeeze there at the moment. They have begun to adjust to a new school which is similar, but isn't home. The BCS children have welcomed them in and the integration is coming along well. Several staff also transferred there and they are either teaching or helping out with the building project directly or by freeing others to be more involved. One of the senior girls' comments was that the beach house that they are living in with the opportunity to relax there was the bright spot in a very difficult time. One other staff member has moved on to Dakar to join the church team there and the remainder have been repatriated and are working on re-entry and a new beginning.

What is the future for VIS? The international schools in Côte d'Ivoire had all been affected by the instability there following the coup several years ago. Numbers of expatriates had gone down and as families left when their children completed high school education, new families were not moving in to replace them. VIS staff had already met with administrators from two other international schools in Côte d'Ivoire area to discuss the situation of falling rolls. All of these schools have now been overtaken by the latest, and most severe, crisis faced by this country. The future is very uncertain for expatriate Christian workers generally in this country and for VIS and the other international schools in particular. We can watch this situation and pray that the Lord will give His people the wisdom that they need when facing difficult decisions ahead.

As a sad postscript to this article, we would like to extend our official condolences to Dianne Cash, Warren and Bronwyn, and the rest of the family following Ian's death on the 1st of November. Ian had been ill for some weeks with what was believed to be hepatitis, but when he showed no signs of recovery further tests revealed pancreatic cancer. Ian had served at VIS for several years, latterly as the school co-ordinator. Ian is now with the Lord that he has served and loved throughout his life, but remember his family as they come to terms with their loss.

Your comments on integration with the host culture

There were a number of responses to the article in the last edition of Educare.

Marilyn Mertz, who spent time at VIS and now helps advise MKs and families in the USA, underlined the dangers of older girls and young female staff trying to join in with language clubs (and other similar clubs allowing social interaction) in Côte d'Ivoire. The local young men viewed this as an opening to meet up with them outside of the club and would freely visit the dormitories, creating problems for the girls and the house parents. This was not a suitable context for integration for the girls concerned.

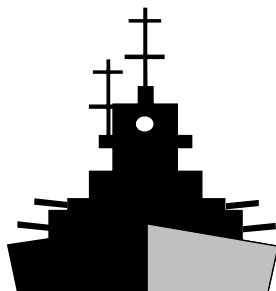
Prof. Dr. Cristina Alleman-Ghionda of the University of Cologne (Köln) philosophy department reminded us that the global mobility affecting the mission community also affects many other groups and that our contribution on these kinds of issues could well be helpful to them, if we give it sensitively.

Hanni Böker our MK advisor in Germany recommends very strongly that parents who opt for national schools should appoint an educational mentor and be open to his/her advice. She acknowledges that this could be tricky, but is confident that it is worth trying. The reasons she gives are that parents can often not be objective enough

about the influence of the local culture on their children. They may be so pleased that they are integrating that they overlook the fact that they are subtly absorbing values contrary to their own. Parents may also misjudge what the re-entry requirements for higher and further education are until it is too late, again because they are pleased that the children are settled and doing well enough in the local school.

The Kuhls and the Kallmiers both commented that this is a subject that should be dealt with, and thought through by team leaders and all concerned expatriate Christian workers. There were other comments of encouragement – keep them coming in! Remember though that disagreements are also welcomed and that there is still the possibility to comment on the September Educare as well as this one.

A Secure Environment



The buildings shook with the force of the exploding shells within close range of the school. Why was this happening in this beautiful and peaceful countryside of palm trees and rice fields? Why were the lives of so many being devastated by this senseless conflict? Bursts of automatic weapons' fire clattered jarringly through the air as soldiers and rebels clashed. Not the familiar and peaceful sounds of wildlife this morning, but the almost surreal sound of these instruments of death and destruction. The group of families and local staff gathered together in the school buildings hoping that this would end soon – but then what? What new devastation and horrors would tomorrow bring?

Is this a scene from a chapter of a war novel? No – this is a vivid memory to those of us who were in BCS immediately prior to the evacuation. The same kind of scene can be recounted by many others who lived in what were once peaceful lands, now devastated by war and rebellion.

Both of the articles in this edition talk about the evacuation of schools in the face of armed conflict. None of the named schools were the target in the conflict, but the risk of injury or death in crossfire was very real. Other schools have been deliberately targeted. Islamic militants intent on bringing death and destruction to the heart of the families of Christian expatriates struck at Murree Christian School in Pakistan. Their assault left 6 of the Pakistani staff working at the school dead. Other schools have been closed down by hostile groups working within the apparent framework of the law in some countries. The thinking – close down the school; make life awkward for these Christian workers and maybe they will go away. BCS and VIS have survived and temporarily joined forces; other schools have not and there are closed down MK schools in many of the world's trouble spots.

There have been violent incidents in schools in the West as well. In 1996 Britain was stunned when Thomas Hamilton burst into a primary school in the quiet Scottish town of Dunblane and went on a killing spree. Recently in Germany a disgruntled former student opened fire and killed a dozen of the teachers at his school. In the USA, armed students have been behind several major incidents resulting in the deaths of fellow students and staff members. Some schools have tightened up security measures as a result, but short of turning the schools into guarded fortresses there is little that can be done to prevent a determined gunman. What is different about international schools is the frequency of the incidents. In our efforts to take the Gospel to the whole world we will sometimes be in places where violence erupts and where we could be caught in the crossfire, or fall foul of

extremist elements that do not welcome our presence resorting to violence. Do we have to change our thinking? Do we need to look at other ways of teaching our children faced with these kinds of dangerous and intimidating situations? What are they and are there particular areas of the world where the dangers are greater? In such zones is the presence of a large Christian or International school too tempting and too easy a target for armed militants or hostile groups within governments?

What are the possible responses when considering our children's safety?

- If we do not set up large international schools that make an easy and tempting target for extremists, we could opt instead for smaller scale models such as home schooling (with or without on-line or correspondence support) or co-operative schooling. The pros and cons of these options have been outlined in detail in a number of TCK publications *, but maybe we should look at this idea on security grounds. The family or small group of families are together and can make decisions with their children with them. The set up is flexible and can be moved much more easily than an entire full sized school in the case of an emergency. The security advantages are that the "target" is much less conspicuous and that unsympathetic governments can more readily accept private tuition than a foreign, and often Christian, school. The high profile attracts a lot of attention, keeping a low profile could make life safer and easier.
- Children could be boarded in a "safe" country (where is that?!). This raises the obvious question of how we can decide what is safe – at one stage, not too many years ago, Côte d'Ivoire was considered safe; these things can change rapidly. However, if parents choose to work in volatile areas, the knowledge that their children are being cared for and educated in a stable situation can be worth the separation as well as the financial and time investment involved. Another potential drawback here is that the children could be afraid for the safety of their parents. Regular news can help with this, but if the children know that their parents are caught up in a coup or a rebellion they can understandably be very anxious.
- In the most extreme cases, mission policy makers could discourage or even prevent any of their families from entering such volatile situations and insist that only single workers or married couples without dependent children be allowed to work there. A possible compromise solution would be for the family to live in a safer place, but for one or both of the parents to make regular working visits to the place and people where they minister.

Do you have any experiences or thoughts that you would like to add to this? Please let us know on SteveGill@mkea.freeserve.co.uk or at 67 Budbury Tynning, Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire, BA15 1QE, Great Britain

Contact us too if there are other issues that you would like to see us address in future editions of Educare. The publication is meant to be a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences. We would especially welcome contributions from third culture children themselves.



* E.g. Jean Barnicoat's MK manual, already available on CD from Bulstrode and soon to be printed
Families on the Move by Marion Knell
The Third Culture Kid Experience by Dave Pollock and Ruth Van Reken & etc.