

Edmonds Beacon

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Mission to Ethiopia with love and caring

By Rita Bennett
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Why would I, a comfortable American middle-class Northwest widow in her 60s, fly 16,730 miles roundtrip on a mission to Ethiopia? I had traveled with my late pastor husband, Dennis, to many countries such as England, Scotland, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, and Jamaica but never to a third world country.

Before this I had not paid much attention to where Ethiopia was on the world map. I now know it is in east-central Africa and is encircled clockwise starting at 7 o'clock with: Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda.

Ethiopia, the poorest of the African countries, has a population of 65 million. The two major religions are Ethiopian Orthodox and Muslim. It also has one of the world's largest "leprosy villages" which I'll tell you about shortly.

Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia with a population of four million, is where I stayed and functioned with a team of 25 from seven countries. The Jerusalem Center of Biblical Studies and its director Shlomo Hizak organized the mission tour, and the local Ethiopian tour guide was Dr. Talargie Yeshidenber, a veterinarian.

Our main purpose for this journey was to give away 25,000 Bibles translated into Amharic, the *lingua franca* of the people, though Ethiopians speak 83 languages plus 200 dialects. We spent quite a bit of time on the old-fashioned homey bus and everywhere we stopped people gathered around, hands outstretched, eyes pleading for gifts.

Fortunately I brought 300 lollipops from Costco. At times I would throw a

handful of lollipops out the window or when I was leaving a meeting at a childcare center, prison, or church, I would hand them out to say "I care."

My most memorable day was when we rode our bus down the bumpy dirt road to the Mekanissa Leper's Village. Our tour guide let us know we'd arrived at the Leper's Village which houses 10,000 people.

I looked out of the window and saw little huts made of wooden branches and clay, with roofs of corrugated iron. The roads were muddy from the rain and I wondered how I would be able to walk without slipping. A new friend, Dee, offered to help me.

We knocked on a door and peered in. There was a youngish woman, head wrapped in a shawl, sitting with her teenaged son and 5-year-old daughter. Through our pastor translator, we visited and gave them Bibles.

As we prepared to leave, the translator gave the woman an Ethiopian hug which is done, left to right, on both sides of the head. I felt free to follow suit. I had never met or touched a person with leprosy before.

I knew that leprosy is caused by a bacillus and it is not contracted easily by persons in normal health. Later I learned that in 1970 on the island of Malta, multidrug therapy (MDT) was developed which can completely cure leprosy.

"There are presently 7,764 cases of it in Ethiopia," says Talargie, "and it costs \$240 to rehabilitate one person." If the world's population had a goal of ridding the earth of leprosy, it could be done!



Edmonds emissary Rita Bennett discovered a different level of poverty, sickness and need in her mission to Ethiopia. "Here I'm sharing the gift of a children's Bible story with a precious little boy," she says.

We visited others. Thirty lepers were visited by the teams. As we left, teenagers gathered around us wanting and almost demanding Bibles. We gave them our remaining Bibles.

Later Dr. Talargie sent me an e-mail. "Results are coming in. Last Saturday in Mekanissa Village 23 young gangsters jumped into the church premise and swarmed it, and to our amazement they asked to be registered at the church to receive our Bible class!

Looking back, it was worth the challenges of a yellow fever shot, Malaria pills, diarrhea, muddy roads and old buses to be able to bring the Bible, a smile, salvation prayers, soap for prisoners, lollipops, songs, testimonies, and the gift of hope to the gentle Ethiopian people.

(The Edmonds author Rita Bennett, who is an Emotionally Free seminar presenter, is writing her ninth book, "Heaven Tours," due out in July 2003. For more information about her work, write P.O. Box 576, Edmonds, WA 98020 or visit www.EmotionallyFree.org.)