Faith on the Fast Track

We spent a comfortable night in our holiday flat and on the Thursday morning took some time find our bearings locally. We are very close to the Botanical Gardens and the Steve Biko Campus of the Durban University of Technology. It is a student-area so the laundrette and grocery shopping are all a short walk away. In the afternoon we drove to the rather ostentatious Pavilion Shopping Centre to buy a padded, foldable camping mattress for Mubita, rather than having to wrestle with blowing up the provided inflatable mattress each evening. Based very loosely on the design of the Brighton Pavilion, the mall is built in a faux and fanciful Indo Saracenic style, a bit like a set for Aladdin, perched on a hill at the edge of the motorway, with rotundas, domes and minarets. No doubt the Prince Regent would have approved as it caters well for gastronomic cuisine, gaming, luxury shopping, (film) theatres and generally fast-living!

On Friday we walked down to the Durban Exhibition Centre where a series of marquees across the road by Central Park served as the Registration Centre and the Shuttle Terminus. We recrossed the footbridge to the Exhibition Halls and the Global Village which were being set out and bumped into Bateuke Waklisiku from the Catholic Medical Mission Board. We then took Mubita to the beach, and got to work with bucket and shovel on the sand.

On Saturday 16 July the Interfaith Preconference got underway at La Vita Conference Centre near the beach with a lighted candle to signify the sacred space. As people of faith and hope, we believe that the ending of HIV and AIDS will happen. The conference themes were reducing stigma and discrimination, increasing access and defending human rights. The immediacy of working towards these goals was underscored. A major concern to emerge was the failure to treat children living with HIV. There are reckoned to be over a million children globally who are untreated. Nigeria has 26% of its affected children not receiving ART, India 11%, RSA 7% and Zambia 4%.

In other matters of Zambian interest Dr Jean Claude Kazadi from Catholic Relief stressed the important role that local partners play in response to treatment and support. There was also a moving testimony from Melodie Jongwe a young mother who is HIV+ and whose son was also born HIV+. Melodie knew nothing of the disease and it was only when both mother and child contracted blisters that she returned to the clinic where her positive status was confirmed. She called on the Church for greater commitment to ends AIDS as a matter of Justice. It is sobering to reflect that 75% of all new infections are in adolescent girls. It was very disappointing that no Zambian data was available as the local CDC had not responded with an agreement

It was also good to meet up with Church of Scotland colleagues and partners who were there; Rev Aftab Gohar from Grangemouth and Rev Daniel Ganizane from Mozambique.

This was echoed on Sunday in Rev Phumzile’s Mabizela’s closing speech where she asked us to recommit ourselves in the face of AIDS-fatigue keeping in the fast lane, bringing to mind the verse from Galatians 6:9 ***So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*** and in line with the WCC Central Committee Tronheim call to see God in the weak, vulnerable and marginalised and speaking with those suffering poverty injustice exclusion, stigma and discrimination. It is difficult to help empower communities and address their challenges and needs while having to follow the rules laid down by donors.

Ensuring testing and treatment for children was an important target to set. Youth, adolescents, women and girls are vulnerable groups at present. The role of the home, family and Church family was emphasized in tackling stigma. Churches should be safe places that encourage inter-generational and intersectional conversations. Topics for discussion should include sex, sexuality, gender and violence. Youth sensitive clinics for sex education and information were also a necessity in the struggle to attain an AIDS-free generation. Though in all of this where are the men? There is a lack of balance here and questions need to be asked about the socialisation of boys and young men who perpetuate gender-based violence.

On Sunday, Keith went with Rodney, our landlord, to his Church in Overpoort, the Conquering through Prayer Ministries International. It is a mainly a South Asian Church witnessing in a predominantly Muslim –area, meeting in a converted and modernised cinema. It was a lively time of praise and worship with the message from the Pastor, Clive Gopaul, who first planted the Church about 25 years ago and now has a congregation of around 5500 souls. A World Prayer Centre was opened by the denomination in 2000, which is open to all; it hosts an annual National Prayer Conference in July and a weekly School of Prayer meets there too. The encouragement is to make local churches praying churches and to equip members with necessary skills to be this.