

# HOW TO HAVE A CONFERENCE (FOR THE POOR)

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Zambezia Province wants a conference. Our hundreds of churches there are far away and have been left out of previous conferences. They don't have telephones or post offices. The People live in mud huts. Heavy rains have washed away their crops. Their children, thin and covered with sores, wear filthy rags. They hardly know about the outside world. But they want Jesus. They know He is their only hope, and they want us to go north and minister to them. They want to be taught. They want prayer. They want the Holy Spirit to touch them. They want our encouragement. They will do anything to have a conference.

First, we have to get to them so we can make plans together. We can't spend days and days each way struggling over terrible, muddy roads. So I fly and bring some staff with me. I get up to Beira's airport in central Mozambique, spend the night, and take off again in the morning toward Morrumbala, another two hundred miles to the north beyond the Zambezi River. It's very windy. A cold front has brought heavy rain in the night, and now the clouds have moved north of us, right in our way. But our pastors are expecting us that morning, and we have to try to get there.

Rain squalls are all around us. Once more we skim the trees, hills and rivers at low level to keep sight of the ground with the rain beating on the windshield. We can't see anything ahead but I keep

studying my chart to know what terrain is coming. When the rain lets up we are again treated to vistas of Africa at its most remote. Bouncing in the turbulence, we make out footpaths and isolated huts that mark the presence of people — who, even here at the ends of the earth, matter more to the Good Shepherd than anything else.

We pass the Zambezi River, which has subsided from the floods of early this year. The fields are muddy, and the people have lost everything. The aid organizations are gone, donated food is finished, and yet there are no new crops. This is winter, and the people are cold, wet and miserable. We have hundreds of churches along the Zambezi too, but now we are going farther north to people who are even more desperate and neglected.

Morrumbala has a landmark, a huge, rocky hill that juts a thousand feet in the air from the plain around the town. We see it far in the distance and know we are on course. As we draw closer I descend around it and find an isolated dirt airstrip hidden behind. We have a gusty crosswind. The field looks like it's hardly been used in years. Very carefully I feel for the surface. It's rough, the roughest I've landed on in Mozambique. It's uneven and rocky, with thick clumps of weeds, but our oversize tires can handle it. We shake and rattle to a stop in blowing dust, turn around and taxi back toward the direction of town.

Hundreds of children run out to meet us. I pull out a video camera, which has them all jumping and shouting, wanting to be

included. We have no idea where our churches are, so we head for town far off down a dirt road, with children laughing all around.

This is incredibly exciting for them. But I notice their dark rags, bare feet, and hair discolored from malnutrition.

We have so many churches in the area that we can't help but run into Christians along the road, and they point us to a pastor's house. He in turn leads us to more pastors, and soon we are with the church leaders of the province. We all duck through a small door into the darkness of a mud hut to talk and plan. Somehow they find enough rough chairs in the village for us all. There is a table, a small oil lamp, a dirt floor...and nothing else. We cannot even see each other until our eyes adjust. Because of the cold wind no one here wants windows.

Four thousand people are expected at this conference next week. Many will walk for days, barefoot and without food. They will sleep outside on the ground or on grass mats, even in the rain. We will find some battered trucks in town to rent so we can go farther and bring in more pastors and their people. As many people as we can transport will come from all over the province, which is three hundred miles across and only one often in Mozambique. Lack of transport is one of the fiercest obstacles to ministry in this country, which is so lacking in infrastructure. Even in the cities, few can afford the pennies it takes to get to a meeting by public transport, which usually means hanging on to an overloaded pickup truck or getting crammed into the back of a leaning, smoking van.

There is no hall or stadium in Morrumbala. We will meet on a rough soccer field, full of rocks and weeds. We will bring a generator and the heaviest sound equipment we can carry. We will have to feed everyone; so we will truck big pots in from Beira and scour the countryside for firewood. We'll have to dig latrines and put up plastic walls for privacy. Freshwater is a big problem, but WorldVision has a compound nearby with a well, and we'll need to get extra tanks. Even cooking plain maize under such conditions for so many is tough and tedious, and many will be working throughout our meetings. If it rains there will be a lot of mud and misery. Nobody has blankets and the nights are cold. We will encourage local people to take travelers into their huts. Eleven pastors from Zambezia have come to our new Bible school session in Maputo, so we leave some money for their families who are barely surviving. We distribute more money for transport and other conference needs. Still there are vast needs that we haven't touched yet. All the pastors need Bibles. They and their people all need food, clothes and medical care. They need seed and farm tools. They cry out to the Lord every day from early in the morning for His presence and help, and He has responded by sending us. We are His hands, filled with His heart, moving with His energy and wisdom. We cannot imagine a more wonderful calling. We are in an impossible situation, but God has delighted in putting us here, and we would not want to be anywhere else. "Keep breaking us, Jesus, until we are as sensitive and moved as you are, and will do everything you have in your heart for us to do..."

What will actually happen next week? What will God do as we do our best? Obviously we still don't know how to have a conference for the poor. Our efforts are like a few fish and loaves of bread

before all these people. They need love. They need shepherding. They need to be taught. They need to be healed in body and heart. They need His Presence. They need Him. May the conference be a wedding feast. May the poor in spirit come from the east and west to eat and drink at the Master's table without cost. How will He love them? How will He satisfy them? Is He enough even for them?

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