

# IN AFRICA WITH THE RAFIKI FOUNDATION

*by Karl Mason, Tall Oaks Classical School*

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It is common to deride teachers with the sarcastic dismissal: “At least you have the summers off!” Certainly, teachers generally do possess in large amounts during the summer what many Americans can only dream of: plenty of free time. It is also common for busy Christians to wish they could do something more directly related to the Lord’s work other than what God has called them to do in their vocations. Again, teachers at Christian schools are uniquely blessed with the opportunity to serve Christ in the instruction of covenant children.

Now, teachers at ACCS-accredited schools have an even greater opportunity to follow their vocations in Africa for the summer, serving in short-term missions

work while doing something they are already equipped to do. A new scholarship opportunity has become available for classical Christian school teachers to work in ten African countries for the purpose of modeling classical pedagogy for African teachers. Over the past decade, the Rafiki Foundation has built ten orphanage-schools, called “villages,” in Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. The directors of Rafiki (the word means “friend” in Swahili) are designing and implementing a classical Christian curriculum for every school in Africa. African teachers typically have only been through their national education training programs, so Christian

teachers who are experienced with the classical model are in high demand as this new model (to Africans) is introduced to a new continent.

I left Philadelphia International Airport on the evening of Saturday, July 6, and arrived at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi, Kenya, on the following evening. Rafiki sent a shuttle to pick me up, and I stayed the night in a hotel in central Nairobi. Around 10:00 the next morning, the same driver, James, arrived at the hotel and we drove out to the orphanage, which is located on the outskirts of the city. James gave me some good advice as we drove out: “Look for the beauty in Kenya, and don’t let the dirt and poverty blind you to it.” At first I wasn’t sure what he meant, since central Nairobi has a cosmopolitan feel, though traffic and air pollution choke even its central arteries.

As we exited the very modern Thika Road Superhighway, things

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quickly changed. Paved roads remained, but declined dramatically in quality. Side streets were dirt lanes, rocky, and even more—if possible—full of potholes than the main road. People were everywhere, and poverty was inescapable. I found

where prayer was very powerful, where God is doing great things, and where real positive change can and will take place through the power of the Gospel.

The village administrator, Yeen-Lan, met me at the gate with a

I worked with the English teachers from grades six through ten, who audited most frequently, but teachers from all subjects and grades visited my classroom throughout the month. It was humbling to know that other teachers, many with



out later that these neighborhoods were not even the poorest slums, but lower middle class. James was right, though. There was much beauty of spirit, energy of soul, and strength of character in the midst of seemingly chaotic poverty. Despite the drastic difference in living conditions, the teachers I worked with from this place were uniformly polite, warm, and welcoming to foreigners, and many gave clear evidence of deep devotion to Christ. Throughout my time there, I was constantly challenged in my Christian walk to work more diligently and to pray more faithfully. I felt I was in a place

warm welcome. After lunch and orientation with Rose, the headmaster of the school, we began to sort out what I would be doing in the coming weeks. The month would be busy and full of opportunities to serve. As a dialectic English teacher, I would be working mainly with the sixth grade class for two hours every morning. In addition, I would teach four other literature classes for grades seven through twelve, and each class would run twice a week.

Each day I taught in Kenya, I tried to provide an example of good teaching practice in the classroom for observing teachers. Particularly,

more experience than I possessed, would be watching in class each day. This made my preparation times more meaningful as I considered not only the content and methods of presentation, but also whether classical instruction methods would be clearly seen by my adult audience.

What was a typical day at Rafiki Kenya like? Every morning, after a staff devotional and prayer time, all teachers and students marched to the flagpole by class to hear a short morning lesson from the headmaster, to sing Kenya's national anthem, and to pray. Then we walked to our classrooms. My first class with

the sixth grade ran from 8:30 until 10:30 every morning, and then we took a break for recess and tea for the teachers. After that, I would have some spare time to prepare for whichever literature classes were scheduled for that day, or to do some grading. At lunch, I would either walk to the dining hall to eat with the children, or (when I was in a hurry or felt the need of some American food) I would prepare lunch in the guesthouse that I shared with other volunteer missionaries. Classes were over by 3:30 p.m., although older students often stayed until 4:30 to do homework. Dinner was served at 5:15, and I often was scheduled to share in Bible study with one of the orphan cottages at 7:30. In the evening, I might do some reading or lesson preparation. For me, “missionary midnight” came quickly around 9:30 or 10:30 p.m. At the end of a tiring, yet rewarding day, it was good to fall asleep.

Besides the teaching, I also conducted four in-service sessions of about an hour and a half each, covering topics that the headmaster thought would be beneficial to the staff. I gave an overview of classical education, explained John Milton Gregory’s *Seven Laws of Teaching*, covered lesson planning with reference to the seven laws, and demonstrated the Socratic method of instruction. Lesson planning was

the most interactive session, and teachers enjoyed working to include the seven laws in their plans while I answered their questions.

Outside the classroom, the village administrator worked hard to make the short term missionaries’ lives more delightful. On Tuesdays, we were invited to the weekly Rafiki staff meeting, made up of all the missionaries. This was an encouraging time of singing, Bible study, prayer, and sharing village news and announcements. On Saturdays, a missionary might drive us into Nairobi to do some shopping or sightseeing, and on Sundays, we were invited to accompany one of the missionaries to a local church. Nairobi has much to offer in the way of good restaurants and tourism, and in the course of my five weeks in Africa, I visited a giraffe sanctuary, an elephant orphanage, a bartering market, the home of author Isak Dinesen, the National Museum, and saw an exhibition of traditional dance, just to name a few of the local attractions. Kenya boasts some of the most spectacular wildlife and scenery in Africa, and I had the chance to take a short weekend safari as well.

On the day I was planning to fly out, August 7, a fire destroyed the international terminal of Jomo Kenyatta Airport. That day, I was on the road with a missionary, David, and the assistant to the

village administrator, Geoffrey. We were visiting local schools that have adopted Rafiki’s Bible study program for religious instruction. Together, we marveled how God had changed the hearts of students in one school where this program had been effectively carried out. I was also wondering how I was going to get home, but even as I was tempted to worry, the power of the gospel was so clear that it was impossible to feel powerless. Sooner than I ever expected, the airport reopened. Four days after I was scheduled to leave, I was able to catch a flight (I should say, about four flights altogether) home. Seeing the way God works in the circumstances in our lives was made clear throughout my time in Africa.

Looking back, it was most rewarding at the end of the month to have formed bonds with missionaries, with teachers, and with students. The missionaries warmly welcomed all volunteers, inviting us to their homes, and we formed friendships that will not be forgotten. I will miss many students there, especially my sixth grade class. That’s why I hope to return next year, if possible.

Go to Africa with Rafiki. Your soul will grow as you experience God’s word at work in the lives of children.