

## Reflections from Kenya. November 2009. By Steve King

“From the rising of the sun to the place that it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised”. The Psalmist in Ps 113:3 gives us the reality that God’s Kingdom is much larger than we often envision it. There is no where that the name of the Lord is not to be praised.

### **How It All Started**

That’s how my trip to Kenya this past week started. Well, sort of. Back in August I attended the Willow Creek Association Leadership Summit. The summit is designed to encourage, challenge, and equip church leaders to develop our ability to lead our congregations. I ran into a friend of mine, Joe Horness, who used to be on staff as worship director at Willow Creek. As we were catching up, Joe told me that this year he had been asked to oversee a number of Global Leadership Summit (GLS) sites in Africa, including countries like Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, and Kenya. We chatted some more and he said “hey Steve – you should come help me at the site in Nairobi”. I said, “yeah, that’d be cool”, but figured it wouldn’t go any further. My wife Sherry, however, said “you should go do it – what a great opportunity”. So we talked some more, and I approached my executive and senior pastors with the idea. They thought it was a great idea too. So, the idea looked to turn into a reality.

Back to reality. As I flew over the Atlantic on my first leg to London, there was a feel of familiarity. Back in the late 1990’s, I traveled internationally for business quite often. Incidentally, on my first leg of the trip to London, I became a million-miler on American Airlines. I’m not sure exactly what that’ll get me, and I’m not really sure it’s a good thing that I’d traveled that much. But I digress....This was my first ministry trip out of the country. So even though the travel routine felt comfortable, easy and familiar, I had a whole different anticipation this time.

Leading up to the trip, I, along with my family and friends, were praying that I would be a blessing to the Kenyan GLS by serving to help produce the GLS event. While we weren’t sure what specific help they would need, these events are large, complex, and have a lot of moving parts, so we knew help would be critical in pulling off the GLS. We were also praying that God would use this time to expand my view of His kingdom, and also that He would challenge me, refresh me, encourage me, and speak to me by getting me out of my normal ministry context.

### **The light bulb goes on**

As I stood in a looooooonnnggggg security line in terminal 5 at London’s Heathrow airport, I was struck by the diversity represented in that place. People of all nationalities, languages, colors, and races were all standing in the same place. It was just a small glimpse of what heaven will be like – every people and every nation. I’m just hoping heaven might not have the long security lines..... Suddenly, Psalm 113:3 popped into my head. “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised”. This verse first came to me many years ago when I was in a hotel room in Columbus, OH. I can’t remember the prospect or client I was visiting, but I was sitting quietly in my hotel room early one morning, and asking God if he had anything to speak to me. And out of nowhere, Psalm 113:3 was impressed in my mind. Kind of random I thought, but I jumped up and read that verse. Hmmmmm. So God – another question for you – “why that verse”? And this time, there was simply silence. That verse has rattled around in my head on various occasions since then, and I keep it in front of me in my office.

After reflecting on it a bit more, I’m wondering some things. Back in the 90’s when I traveled internationally quite often – I have to say that although the travel could become wearying, I thoroughly enjoyed meeting new people, learning about them, learning about their cultures (although I must confess, I’m terribly foreign language challenged), and celebrating how much we all have in common. There’s a truth in there somewhere – there is so much more humans in every culture have in common, than we don’t have in

common. That which binds us together, is much more and much stronger than that which separates and divides us.

Now if you know me, you know that I'm a people person. I love people. All kinds of people. In college, I was attracted to two types of people – those who were different than me, and those who were quirky (some call it 'weird' or 'different', I prefer 'quirky'). And I'm still that way. My wife likes different and quirky people too – which is likely why she married me. (Hey I'm quirky, not weird!). I've always had a passion for living in diversity.

It is sort of funny, because I grew up in a small rural town in Pennsylvania, and there wasn't any diversity there. But once I got into college, I was drawn to diversity. After college, we lived in a townhouse complex that, with only 10 units, represented 6 different ethnicities. It was so cool! And so I loved diversity in my business travel.

And now that I'm in full-time vocational ministry, I'm still feeling a passion and desire for our church to model a piece heaven, and I believe that diversity is an element of that. There's a common phrase that says something like this "the hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week". WHAT'S UP WITH THAT? The Scriptures are clear – Acts 10:34-35 says this: Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right." And the apostle John in the book of Revelation, in describing the vision God gave him of Heaven says this: Rev 7:9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

So we know heaven is going to be full of all types of folks – so why aren't our churches? That's way more than I'm going to be able to get into here. But, suffice it to say, I feel like God has wired me in that way, and I have been seeing greater and greater diversity at Parkview over the past several years. I'm not sure why, other than God is in it.

## **Back to Kenya**

We get in late on Monday night, and Philip, who is our hospitality host from International Christian Ministries (ICM) picks us up and takes us to our hotel. Philip is a wonderful, kind, funny guy. He's got a young family, a heart for God, and the gift of hospitality for sure. I enjoyed getting to know about his life, his family, and his ministry. We would spend much time stuck in Nairobi traffic with Philip. Joe and I didn't have anything on the schedule until 2:30 PM on Tuesday, so we crashed around 3 AM. When I woke up and looked at my watch – it was 1:20 PM on Tuesday. I can't remember the last time I slept that late!

We grabbed a quick lunch and Philip took us to Nairobi Pentacostal Church (NPC), where the GLS would be held on Thursday and Friday of that week. We met lots of people, and started looking at logistics and technical details to ensure there were no glaring problem areas that needed attention. We also sat down and went through the entire programming grid. There were a total of 8 sessions that were presented using a DVD from the Willow leadership summit in August. There were 3 facilitators in Kenya to introduce and facilitate the sessions, a number of technical and logistics folks, ushers, food details, and a worship team made up of 4 or 5 churches in Nairobi. There were lots of moving parts. In a conference like this, timing is critical, and staying on schedule is absolutely critical. For the attendees to benefit the most, we needed to ensure that the timelines were realistic, that each person knew the order, the timing, the logistics of getting on and off of the stage, etc. One small time slip here, one small time slip there, and it's hard to get back on track. And given that so much prayer, thought, and effort went into planning every detail of the GLS, this was important. We trimmed here and there on the grid, made sure we knew what changes needed to be made and communicated, then walked through the entire 2 day conference. Then we headed back to the hotel for dinner, and a great time of catching up with Joe.

Over the past several years, Joe has come to Parkview to lead a retreat for the worship arts team. I originally met Joe on the phone. When I felt God calling me into full-time vocational ministry, I called Joe out of the blue. I had attended one of his sessions at an arts conference, and knew that he had tons of experience – he had been doing that for more than 20 years. So I called Joe up – he had no idea who I was, but he spent an hour and a half listening, talking, and helping me discern and process if this was really God’s call on my life. Over the years of the retreats I’ve gotten to know and love Joe as a friend, and in June spent a weekend up in Michigan with him. So having this time together was great on many levels. As a friend, we shared our joys, struggles, pains, and victories that come in ministry. We shared ideas as fellow arts leaders, and, we laughed a lot together.

## **Wednesday**

On Wednesday we went to NPC for what was supposed to be a “dress rehearsal” of sorts – complete with all the facilitators, the music team, the tech team, and the DVD segments. This requirement was communicated many, many times to the conference team. However, it seems there was a breakdown in communication somewhere. NPC was having a prayer service that evening, the band was not available during the day, and the tech team really wasn’t quite ready either. And, we couldn’t get the video to fill the entire screen with the right aspect ratio. Oh, and the power went out a couple of times that day. So we went back to our hotel, where our internet access was out. More on that later.

The band finally got to NPC around 8:30 PM or so. And we mostly worked on the opening transition from a video called “choir plant” – an extremely powerful video produced by Willow. Greg Ferguson, one of the creative folks at Willow, had written a video and music arrangement of a few pieces of music, mostly based around “Holy, Holy, Holy” and the Doxology. Video and audio were captured around the world, in many languages, and integrated into a single video. It was incredible! And, this was how the conference was to start off. Immediately following the video, the music team was to transition directly into an opening worship segment. So we spent most of the evening on that. The tech team still didn’t know which songs the music team was going to do in various segment over the next two days, so no lyrics were input yet for media display. And, there were not as many wireless mics as were supposed to be available. And, we didn’t have enough batteries. And, the power went out a couple times again. And, the wireless internet access at NPC wasn’t working.

Needless to say, Joe and I were a bit unsettled going back to the hotel that evening. I had been praying like crazy, because I figured God was going to have to come through, because it appeared that we were not as prepared as we would have liked, to deliver a smooth, high-quality conference that we had hoped.

## **Day 1 of the Conference**

We were up very early to get to NPC to work out more “kinks”. Everyone – the band, tech teams, etc promised to be there, ready to go, at 7 AM. At about 8:15 AM we finally had almost everyone assembled, so instead of a run-through, we barely squeezed in a sound check. Joe and I were stressed. It didn’t seem like anyone else was....

The conference started on time, the choir planet video rolled, and the music team took the stage....And, they rocked the house. Now, I had never been in a pentacostal church, or a church in Africa. What took place there was inspiring. Although I was supposed to be the guy down by the stage making sure each person knew their next cue, making sure they had mics, got people on and off the stage, I couldn’t help but get lost in the passion, the fervor, and the love, praise and adoration for God that was happening in that church. Around 1,200 church leaders were living out the Psalms that encourage us to dance, to clap, to shout, to play, and to sing with everything we have – all for the praises of our God! Wow – I didn’t want that moment to end. Combine that with my London Heathrow experience, and man – I’m looking forward to heaven! So, a few times, I think I might have neglected my duty of managing the logistics, but by the grace of God, the logistics, speakers, facilitators, lighting cues, and band cues went pretty smoothly. By the end of the first

day, the feedback from the attendees was very good. And, by just reading the room – the leaders there were absolutely engaged in every facet of the conference. We in America take these conferences for granted. Sometimes I wonder if we just use them to get out of the office, kill some time, or travel to a new place. But these leaders – they were hungry for leadership development. They were completely engaged, and during times of facilitation following each DVD session were wrapped up in sharing what they had learned, how it could apply in specific situations, and what they'd do with it when they returned to their home church. That was cool.

At the end of day 1, we gathered as a team to do a recap and evaluation of the day. Overall, the evaluation was positive. We had a few technical glitches, but we identified and corrected those, and the power didn't go out the rest of the conference. There were a few logistics issues, with breaks, snacks, and lunch, but they were minor, and were easily improved.

Joe and I went home exhausted, but encouraged – especially when you consider how we were feeling just 24 hours prior to that. We went back to the hotel and enjoyed a beverage together, then had a leisurely 3 hour meal together where we confided in some of our funniest and most humiliating moments – like stupid things we said or did in front of rather large congregations. And, I'm guessing we'll rib each other about them forever.

## **Day 2 of the Conference**

We were up early on Friday (day 2), checked out of the hotel, and again got to NPC before pretty much everyone else. Except the tech team was all there earlier that day, ready to go. We checked a few details, the band showed up a bit late, and did a quick sound check. The day went pretty smoothly. The culture there is so much more free-flowing than we in America are. We tend to program everything to the Nth degree – there....well, not so much. We had some last-minute changes in feature songs (yes, if you're going to do a song that requires a backing music track, it's helpful if the tech team actually has that CD), orders of things, etc, but we rolled with it, and the attendees had another great day of learning and sharing.

## **So What?**

So what did I learn from those 2 days? I'm not sure yet. I'm not sure if we're too wrapped up in seeking a smooth, seamless conference because it'll be more effective, if we're perfectionists, or, if we're not relying enough on God. One thing I'm pretty convicted of is that in America, we do not REALLY depend upon God as much as we should. We have so much. Everything we want, we can get with relative ease. We have way more than we need. In Kenya, they have many needs. But you know – God shows up, He works – in spite of the things they don't have. They are dependent upon Him – not for convenience, but because there is no help coming from anywhere else.

I am struck that as I read the Old Testament, the Israelites did pretty well with the dependence upon God thing when times were rough, or when the odds were stacked against them. Things usually went badly when prosperity came – the Israelites because lazy, complacent, and really didn't need God, so their worship became a ritual, a habit or tradition, and they simply went through the motions. I'm wondering if that's what the church in America has become.

Now, I'm not saying that the church in Kenya is doing it all right, and we in America are doing it all wrong. I don't believe that. But, I believe there are some important lessons we can learn from the church in Kenya about placing God at the center of our corporate worship activities. About depending upon Him, about calling to Him often, and passionately, as though our very lives depend upon Him. And, there are things they can learn from us. We can help them learn to use methods, tools, technologies that are being adopted all over the world. We can share leadership principles, and we can pray for them.

As my flight from Brussels to Chicago begins to descend, I have many mixed feelings. I'm excited to see, hug, and kiss my kids and my wife. We only communicated through e-mail this week, and it was hard with the unreliable internet connections in Nairobi. I'm trying to process what God has been speaking to me this past week. What did I take away? What should I have taken away? And – what do I do with it from here? Many more questions than answers. But, I know that I have been changed this week. I am at the same time tired, but encouraged, refreshed, and have a renewed appreciation for the diversity and unity of God's Kingdom. What unites us is truly much more than what divides us.

And truly "From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised."