

Cunningham's Niger Notebook

Sowing seeds of change in the Sahel

Newsletter No 21, August 2004

Dear friends

Greetings once again from Niger, West Africa.

We trust this letter finds you and your loved ones well and enjoying the challenges and highlights of life in your part of the world. We wonder what the last few months have held for you, and what you see as you look out the window. As we write we are surrounded by healthy green millet, bean and peanut crops and we are enjoying a reasonable wet season in Maradi. As with farming communities the world over, the talk is of rainfall, weed and pest problems, and predicting crop yields. The weather is cooler but humid, and the best entertainment in town is watching the tumultuous tropical storms with their deafening thunder, spectacular lightening and torrential (but usually short-lived) rain.

Maradi Integrated Development Project (MIDP)

The vision of MIDP is to work with individuals, communities and the church to facilitate the transformation of physical, social and spiritual life.

“Mai lura da itace bai jin yunwa” –

One who cares for trees will not go hungry.

In August the national tree planting day was blessed by good rains, and we began planting hundreds more trees here at Maza Tsaye. The research into Aussie Acacias as multi-purpose trees in the Sahelian farming system continues at several local sites with promising results. Again we have been encouraged recently by the visit of a group of about 30 scientists and farmers from 12 surrounding countries. They came to see our work on Acacias as well as the farmer managed natural regeneration system developed by MIDP which has been well adopted in some areas and is becoming recognized as the base Agroforestry farming system for the Sahel.

Money doesn't always grow on trees!

In the last few months we have spent quite a bit of time as a team seeking direction and putting together a project plan for the next three-year phase of MIDP. Sourcing

ongoing funding has been a challenge as some of our previous major donors have now put their priorities (and dollars) elsewhere. Effectively MIDP now functions as two interlinked SIM projects. **Part A**, titled FINDING SOLUTIONS, (#NE97345) encompasses the agricultural systems research and demonstration components. (Donations are fully tax deductible). **Part B**, titled TRANSFORMING LIVES, (#NE 89951) encompasses the village health and agricultural teaching, Bible teaching, and radio broadcast work. (Donations to part B are not tax deductible). Thanks to those who support the MIDP in this way. All donations can be made through the national SIM Offices at the addresses listed below. Please quote the project name and number. For further information, contact David or Sue Reuthmeuller at SIM Australia.

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Ongoing impact of village teaching

The real test of successful rural development work is that the practices and attitudes learned endure beyond the time of the project's involvement. As we visit villages where MIDP worked previously, we have been encouraged by evidence of improved health and farming practices continuing, despite the withdrawal of our teaching programs. Several of our previous employees and those we trained continue to act as agents of change and evangelists in their villages. We **pray** that their enthusiasm and impact will continue the learning / transformation process in the many villages where MIDP has been involved over the years.

After harvest we will commence training village leaders and a health and agricultural teaching program in several new villages that have shown significant interest in working with MIDP in our transformational development program. Please **pray** that the motivation of villagers to participate fully in the learning process would be high from the outset.

Farming season

We are thankful that the rains started early this year and the crops are in head on the farm here (although patchy in some other places due to rain deficit and degraded soils). With the very real threat of a major locust plague coming our way we are aware that it is not a good season until the harvest is in the silo in September/October! (Sound familiar?). As they wait for the harvest many families are hungry as food reserves are low or gone. Many come looking for work or food. Please **pray** for a good harvest and protection from the locusts.

Did you know...? FAO experts reckon that a desert locust eats its own body weight or two grams of food every day. One tonne of locusts, a very small portion of an average swarm, eat as much food in one day as 2,500 people. Locust swarms, which are capable of travelling more than 100 km in one day, are capable of destroying huge swathes of crops.

“Da tsattsafi gulbe ke cika” – Drop by drop the river fills.

In July we were fortunate to participate in a Hausa language course for two weeks. It was a good refresher and reminded us that although the “river” of Hausa words flows through our heads, there is a long way to go before the river is “full”! We are still limited and frustrated in our ability with language and continue to work hard at it with the assistance of language helpers. Please continue to **pray** for our continual improvement in this important area.

The Rising tide of Islam

Living in Maradi we are very aware of the increasing strength of Islam in this area. We see more and more women who wear not only a veil, but complete face coverings. There are more and more Koranic schools and new mosques being built, often with aggressive preaching. Although closely watched by the authorities, the more fundamentalist/radical sects of Islam are visible and active. Many of the churches are “feeling the heat” and there are huge pressures on new converts to return to Islam. The constitution of Niger provides for freedom of religion and a secular state, but this is constantly being challenged by the influential Muslims of Niger (and neighbouring Nigeria, which has Sharia Law). Given what is happening on the world stage, we ask you to **pray** for Niger. Pray that the Christians in Niger would be bold and faithful to God as they demonstrate by their lives the transforming power of Christ and the glorious hope we have in Him. Pray that they will know joy and victory in their own Christian lives and unity in the churches.

Family News

Steven’s Story

Steven is now 22 months old and continues to delight us with his happy nature and insatiable curiosity. He is walking, running and climbing and trying his best to keep up with big brother! He understands much and has lots to say but only a few words and lots of squeals so far! His comprehension of simple Hausa is also good and we are frequently reminded that he will end up speaking the best Hausa of all of us. You need humility to be a parent, don’t you! His other great passion is “reading” books. Please **pray** for Steven as he has severe eczema all over his body, which is exacerbated by the heat/humidity and perhaps allergies. Despite treatment we have not been able to resolve it yet.

Aaron’s Antics

Aaron found the first six months here quite difficult with all the adjustments and feeling isolated from his friends etc. It was a fairly rough ride! We are now into a steady routine of home schooling each morning and he has settled down to doing some good work. His great passion is bird watching and learning all about animals and the environment. So he is in his element on the farm here at Maza Tsaye – a real outdoors boy. He also spends many happy hours drawing and reading.

Please **pray** for Aaron regarding friendships with other kids his own age, both English speaking and Hausa, and for continued joy in learning through the Distance Education Program.

Time for a break

Life has been very busy since we returned to Niger in January, so we are taking two weeks off in late August for a family holiday. We are really excited at the prospect of visiting Aussie missionary friends Neil and Lisa Sim and family in Parakou, Benin. The two day drive takes us to a wetter, milder climate which will be a welcome change. We will also spend some time working (and picking up supplies) in Niamey before returning to Maradi. Please **pray** that this will be a time of refreshing and renewal.

Reflection - running the race

It is four years since we landed in Niger to begin our missionary service with SIM. As we adjusted to life here in 2000, all eyes were on the Sydney Olympics. Now in 2004 Athens is in the spotlight. Then we were as keen as any first time athlete competing on the international stage, full of enthusiasm, zeal and untested talent. Now we are still running with determination, filled with a desire to give of our best and to excel at the challenges before us, but it feels rather different. We have a track record. We have come through the highs and lows that any sports competitor experiences. As with any athlete, we sometimes weary of the interminable training program, the demands of the job and being in the spotlight. Like them we also carry our banner with pride as we represent not our country but our Lord. We are spurred on to do our best by the cheers of the crowd – in our case not ticket holders in a big stadium, but faithful praying friends, family and supporters around the world. We are certain that our race is a marathon and not merely a sprint. But it is none of these things that keeps us here in Niger where the sports arena is anything but a magical environment.

We are reminded by the Apostle Paul that as we “run the race” of Christian service we require discipline and focus in order to persevere and to finish well (1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1). We need the determination, wisdom and love that come from our relationship with Jesus Christ and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It is the same for all Christians, no matter what their sphere of service. We pray that as **you** run the race set before you that you will keep in mind the prize for which we compete. **Thankyou** for keeping us in your prayers as we run our “race” in this remote part of Africa.

We really appreciate your encouragement and partnership with us, shown in so many different ways. Thankyou. We look forward to hearing from you. May you know God’s awesome love and grace amidst the busy routine of life.

With love from Peter and Sally, Aaron and Steven Cunningham in Niger

Note About Emails

We have been having some difficulty with our email system. Sorry if you have sent emails to which we have not responded. We probably did not receive them. Hopefully we have now rectified the problem. *Please keep in touch with us*, but if you don't get an acknowledgement within a week or so then simply resend the message. Thanks. Also PLEASE remember that any files over 50K will crash this fragile email system, so no forwards, photos or attachments. ***Thanks for keeping your news flowing in our direction.***