

CUNNINGHAMS' NIGER NOTEBOOK

Sowing seeds of change in the Sahel

Newsletter #27 – June 2006

Dear Friends around the world

Greetings from a very hot Niger as we await the start of the rainy season here. It always amuses me that we live at opposite ends of the thermometer to most of our friends who are now huddled around fires to keep warm of an evening!

We trust this finds you and your family fit and well, and enjoying life. We hope you will enjoy catching up on our news from the last few months. There is much to tell

BOYS

Both **Aaron** and **Steven** continue to thrive out here. The pool is definitely the most popular activity of the week at this time of year due to the heat. They are enjoying some special friendships now that the Nicholson family (from NZ) have moved in next door. It is great always having other English speaking kids to play with. We grown-ups reckon its good having neighbours here on the farm too.



Aaron & Amy doing school

Since March Aaron has been doing his schooling each day with **Amy Bicknell** (from South Australia) who has come to Niger to check out missionary life. They have done some ten weeks together, giving Sally a break from the role of teacher while she focused on improving her language skills some more, and doing project administration. We have been grateful for Amy helping our family in this way. However, Amy has now decided to go and work at SIM's Galmi Hospital for the next 4 months where she can get some work experience in her chosen field of medicine. This means that Sally and Aaron will be continuing the Distance Education curriculum together until the end of the year. Steven is also starting to do some pre-school activities. Anything to do with letters, numbers, stories, craft, shapes and colours (or any combination) is of interest to this energetic little man with the lots of curiosity and heaps of imagination. Aaron's latest enthusiasm is browsing the Internet, which we now have access to at home, and also use for school projects, etc.

One recent highlight for the boys was experiencing a total **solar eclipse** at the end of March. We watched through welding goggles as the sun was completely obscured by the moon for a few minutes, making it dark in the middle of the morning. It was yet another awesome reminder of the amazing creator God whom

we serve. The reaction of locals was really interesting too. Some even thought that the end of the world had come!

LEADERSHIP ROLE

Our colleagues in SIM Niger have elected Sally to a position of leadership on our Area Council. This means meetings in Niamey twice a year, the first being last March. She enjoys the role as it gives her an insight into the full range of ministries in SIM Niger with all of their various challenges.

A BREAK FROM THE HEAT

In early May we drove south 620km to Miango in Plateau State Nigeria where the climate is rather less severe than here. We stayed at an SIM Conference center and enjoyed two weeks of relaxation such as reading, movies, tennis, bushwalks, a zoo visit, games and lots of time with friends. Playing in the rain was a favorite activity for the boys each afternoon! There is something about little boys and mud that is inevitable and lots of fun!



Campout with friends

ONE YEAR ON . . .

This time last year Niger was on the international news because of the **famine**. Grain prices were prohibitively high and malnutrition rates, esp. among children, were very high. There was a huge response internationally and aid flooded in. There was a reasonable harvest in September/October, and the media cameras are no longer here. However, we still see desperate reminders of poverty at every turn. Many are hungry this year now that their food reserves have run out. SIM are running community **grain banks** in some areas to keep prices low, but we are also pleased to see that prices are only half what they were in June 2005. Families take a long time to recover from the debt and other effects of a famine. We need an abundant harvest this season.

- *Please pray for SIM in our work to help relieve suffering here, that interventions would be appropriate and not lead to dependency.*
- *Also pray for good government in Niger that can make all the difference on issues of justice and poverty reduction.*
- *And please join us in praying for good rains across the farming zone of the Sahel this season.*

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 & spiritual life.

We have been most encouraged by all the things that have been happening in the project work over the last few months. After the closure of the teaching program at Bassarawa last year we actively sought opportunities to commence our multi-faceted teaching program in **new villages**. We have met with good enthusiasm in the 5 villages selected and have been busy working with these communities at the very practical level of health and agriculture teaching and demonstration. We work in both Hausa and Fulani villages. Some locations have an existing church with which we partner and others do not.



Planning demo farms at Djido

As Peter sought motivated farmers to work with there were many keen men who came forward to use their farms for demonstration of the **Maradi Agroforestry Farming System (MAFS)** that he has developed. Whilst there are many direct benefits to the farmers, it is also a form of participatory research. We have recently expanded our village teaching network even further as we have been contracted by **World Vision** to implement the same program in an Area Development Program where we are focusing on Acacias and farming systems in 5 villages. This is an exciting new partnership at the local level, which reflects the closer links we have been cultivating with WV regionally.



FMNR workshop field day

In March we were very excited to be major players in two workshops on **Aussie Acacias** for the Sahel Region, and **Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR)**. There were over thirty participants from World Vision across West Africa, as well as colleagues **Peter Yates** and **Tony Rinaudo** from Australia. This was the culmination of many years of research effort and participants returned to their regions with

seed, technical know-how and great resolve to implement Acacias & FMNR into local farming systems to improve food security. We see the enormous technical and village networks of WV as one of the primary vehicles for getting the fruits of our research work on these robust Agroforestry techniques into the Sahelian farming communities.

- *Pray that this would be effective and self-multiplying.*



This year we managed to purchase almost two tonnes of Acacia seed from local farmers for export to Europe through **Kalkardi**. This is an Australian company, directed by Peter Yates, which is developing markets in Europe for Acacia seed food products. Many farmers are seriously planting trees for future harvests and managing existing trees better. Over 30,000 Acacia trees will be planted this year in villages where the MIDP and WV are working. In May, hundreds of women attended **Acacia food cooking demonstrations** in villages. These are good indications that farmers are starting to realize the benefits of these multi-purpose trees. We are currently producing a **recipe book** (in three languages) on Acacia foods. If you would like to taste test some acacia products then go to www.outbackbushfoods.com.au



Farmers selling acacia seed

The development of the demonstration farm here at **Maza Tsaye** continues. Currently we are fencing the 25ha that has been neglected for years. The land is very poor due to bad farming practices and the impact of goats. It will take a few years of better management to restore. We are using a Food for Work program, local share farmers and our church community to do this.

Our **tree nursery** has 10,000 seedlings ready to plant this season, and together with large amounts of compost will enable Agroforestry farming systems to be established on the entire property. We have substantially funded farm wages this year with the sale of wood from the hundreds of Neem trees on the property. They regenerate very quickly. We are glad to have such a great team of hard **workers** on the farm. About half of them are not Christian.

- *Please pray for our witness to them as we work together.*

We have been encouraged to see how well the Nicholson family has adapted to life in Niger. They are still busy with language acquisition, but over the next few months Chris and Frouke will become more involved in MIDP. Chris is an experienced kiwi agriculturalist.

- *Please continue to pray for the Nicholsons and their children Kimberley (16), Brandon (13) and Jonathan (6) as they learn to live and work here.*

Reflection

One of my favorite prayers after working 5 years in this harsh context of poverty and struggle in Niger is the familiar but powerful poem by Reinhold Niebuhr:

SERENITY PRAYER

God,
Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference:
Living one day at a time,
Accepting hardship as the path to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it;
Trusting that you will make all things right,
If I will surrender to your will,
So that, I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next.

I would have titled it the wisdom prayer. I like it because it reminds me that although I am a change agent in this community, I am not to be driven by the desire for *success* in the work, but rather by *obedience* to the Lord who is indeed sovereign - even when I can't see it. This guards me against becoming cynical and burnt out. Niebuhr also reminds me that comfort and happiness are not my main objectives in life, but rather being the person Jesus wants me to be and allowing that to shape my ministry and relationships. As Christians we cannot share what we do not have. We cannot live eloquent lives that provoke questions to which the gospel is the answer unless our lives are made alive by the Spirit of the living God. We need to be spending time with Jesus himself. Ultimately, we look forward to doing that for the whole of eternity.

I wonder how you read this prayer in the midst of your circumstances, which are so different from our own. I pray that you too are continuing to grow in such Godly wisdom.

Well folks, that is most of what we have been doing recently. **Thankyou** for you continued encouragement, prayers and support, which enable us to persevere in this work. We really appreciate having such a faithful team of partners and friends.

As we look to finish the year well before returning to Australia for 9 months of home assignment in 2007, we ask that you continue to pray for us and for the work of MIDP and SIM Niger. Thanks so much.

Yours sincerely,

*Peter & Sally Cunningham,
Aaron and Steven*