

# CUNNINGHAMS' NIGER NOTEBOOK

Sowing seeds of change in the Sahel

Newsletter #28 – Nov 2006

Dear Friends around the world

Greetings from Maradi as we watch a good harvest being brought in from the fields here. When we sent our last newsletter in June we were anxious about the late start to the rainy season. Well it finally came, and we have in general had a good harvest – at least by Niger standards – although it was patchy in places.

We hope that this letter finds you and your families thriving and enjoying the best of a southern hemisphere spring in all its colour and beauty.

There is a lot to tell you about happenings here over the last five months. This will be our last newsletter from Niger for a while as we are heading home to Australia before Christmas.

## Maradi Integrated Development Program (MIDP)

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

We are finishing off the term really encouraged by the momentum of the work with MIDP and the unity of the team. *The seeds of change are beginning to sprout!* A major objective of our ministry was to complete the Research & Demonstration "Finding Solutions" part of the program. We have developed a new farming system called **Farmer Managed Agroforestry Farming System (FMAFS)** that incorporates natural regeneration of trees, multi-purpose Australian acacias and annual crops in an integrated system. More than 125 of these farms (1 or ½ ha) have been established by farmer groups in 10 villages. Fifty are in villages where **World Vision (WV)** has an Area Development Program. This has been the most significant planting (>12,000) of Australia acacias since Food for Work programs in the mid 1990's. The farmers have been enthusiastic and are keen to develop and expand the system in 2007. This farming system is low cost to implement, improves food security, nutrition and biodiversity, reverses desertification, and is transferable.

Staff exchange visits with **ICRISAT** have enabled interchange of ideas and training in new techniques. Ongoing Collaboration with WV enables significant impacts far beyond the Maradi region.

At Maza Tsaye, the **resource centre** has developed with an arboretum of 42 different tree species, FMAFS demonstrations, seed store, mother plantations & seed increase of new crops. The entire property (53 ha) is fenced and 38 farmers assisted with the land restoration program, resulting in excellent crop yields.

The **village health teaching** has also been going well with a high level of interest and commitment in women's groups.



*Peter & Ayouba assessing new hibiscus variety*



*Peter & Ayouba with elephant grass hedge*



*Trees - an essential part of the farming system*

### **Aussie SIM visitors**

We had a fantastic week with Malcolm and Jenny **Watts** and their daughters Erinn and Alicia from Burkina Faso in August. We also had a great week in October with our friends Neil and Lisa **Sim** and family who work in Benin with SIM. Phil and Carol **Short** who are back in Niger working amongst the nomadic Fulani also visit frequently. So in spite of our distance from home we are blessed to have so many Aussie friends within reach.



*Peter & Sally with friends for a meal*

Of course one of the great things we like about working with SIM is the richness of the fellowship we have with our colleagues from around the world who work in or visit Niger. We have many African and overseas visitors to our home each month and are somewhat renowned for having a ministry of hospitality, especially to those traveling.

We have also recently said goodbye to several families (Knights, UK & Eckerts, USA) with whom we were close friends as they move on to the next chapter of their lives after many years in Niger.

As we reflect with them on the legacy of their work as missionaries in this country, we are renewed in our own vision for the work God has given us to do here.

### **Grain Banks**

Following the food shortages in 2005, the churches of Maradi have responded well to the challenge of running a grain bank together with capital provided by SIM. A co-operative approach has meant that grain has been sold at much reduced prices than the open market, helping families to make it through the difficult months when food is more expensive prior to harvest. With this money they can restock the grain bank at harvest when grain is cheap, and sell it next year.

### **Countdown**

After almost three years here in Maradi we are nearly finished our second term of service with SIM in Niger. On December 13<sup>th</sup> we begin the long flight home to Australia, via Europe and Asia. We touch down in Sydney the following day (Austrian Air Flight 1V arriving 4: 55 pm) and will spend several days at SIM Australia's office in Penshurst. Then we drive to Canberra for a few days with Sally's mother. From there we head west to Mildura and a Cunningham family reunion over Christmas. Early in the New Year we will return to our home at Tarrington in SW Victoria, unpack and start settling into regular Aussie lifestyle. The boys start school at the end of January. After three years away, it will be terrific to spend some time in Australia amongst friends and family in familiar surroundings. We have a long list of fun things to do in Australia! And YES we are planning to **return to Niger** for a third term of service, starting in October 2007.

We are already planning our travel and speaking schedule for 2007. We hope to visit Adelaide just before Easter, then share at the Wimmera Victorious Life Convention at Warracknabeal over Easter. A trip to Cowra, Armidale, Cobar and Bourke is planned for July. There are many friends and partners to visit, spread all over south-eastern Australia so it will be a busy time.

***If you have particular dates that you would like to have us come and share about our ministry*** then please let us know as soon as possible so that we can plan accordingly. We will be in Melbourne to visit Croydon Hills Baptist and St Marks Emerald in late January 2007.

Home Assignment is always a juggling act between finding time for relaxation and refreshment, further professional training, reporting back to supporters, speaking at conferences and Bible Colleges, time with our families, and maintaining a stable family life for our boys who will be in school and kindergarten.

In the seven and a half years since we joined SIM we have been very grateful to have a faithful team of prayer & financial partners who have provided for our needs. Thankyou to those who have given so generously, thus enabling us to persevere in ministry here in Niger.

As you know, we continue to rely on support while we are in Australia, just the same as when we are on the field.

#### **Before we go ...**

The list of things to do before we get on the plane is somewhat daunting: report writing, training and handover of work tasks to colleagues, writing funding proposals, trips to Niamey, Niger Area Council meetings, finishing school, packing up our house and belongings, and saying goodbyes, etc. Mid December will roll around very quickly. *Please pray that we would finish this term well and get all the essentials done on time so that things run as smoothly as possible in our absence.* We have had some nagging health worries this year, and are aware that we are physically very tired and in need of a good break. *Please pray especially for Peter that he would find a solution to his recurring Malaria problems and that we would guard against burn out. (The last thing we want is to arrive home in crisis like last time!)*

#### **Boys:**

**Steven** turned four in October and is full of adventure and fun, and always wanting to learn new things. He continues to inspire us with his beautiful smile and happy outlook on life. The things he is most looking forward to in Australia are the beach, grandparents, preschool and ice cream. He has made some really special friends in the last few months and is starting to come to grips with the fact that being an MK means you say a lot of goodbyes.



*Aaron C, Hannah, Josh, and Bethany Sim, Josh & Amy G at Steven's birthday party.*

**Aaron** exhausts and delights us with his inquisitive mind and indomitable sense of fun. We are almost finished school for the year. (It is hard to say who will be more relieved – teacher or student!) His areas of interest at present include knights in armor, vikings, pirates and anything to do with battles, conquests and ancient civilisations. That is, unless he is exploring the world wide web or playing computer games or chess. Great imagination!

Thanks for praying for our boys. We are especially grateful that they remain very healthy and happy. *Pray that they will handle the transitions back to Aussie life well. Pray that we will be able to deal with their questions like, "where is our real HOME– Australia or Africa?"*

## Reflection - Hope and hopelessness

As we write, billions of devout Muslims here in Niger and around the world have just finished their month of daytime fasting called RAMADAN. Keeping the fast is one of the five "pillars of Islam" along with daily prayers, almsgiving, the declaration of faith, and pilgrimage to Mecca. In Hausa culture it is difficult to separate Islam from traditional beliefs, and even fairly nominal Muslims make a show of keeping the fast. (Young children, pregnant women and nursing mothers, the sick, and travelers are exempt). It is a time of great solidarity among Muslims. It is impossible not to notice the changes that take place in this month. Work productivity is drastically reduced, (public service, banks and businesses have reduced work hours), more people go to mosque prayers and street prayers, there is no cooked food for sale on the streets during the day, people spit all the time, hospitals and clinics are kept busy, and people are often grumpy and short tempered. After the 6:30 pm prayers however, everybody comes alive! Food is eaten. People party all night. The streets are alive with people.

Can you imagine what it is like to be a Hausa Christian in the midst of such a major time of religious observance? Many of our Christian friends say it is the time of year when they feel most isolated and marginalised in their own community. Many experience persecution because NOT keeping the fast accentuates the difference between Christian and the majority Muslim population. Some return to Islam under pressure from family and friends. And yet for many Christians here it is a reminder that their hope does not lie in mere religious observance or community solidarity, but in the reality of FREEDOM in Christ and the certain HOPE of an eternity spent with Him. *Please pray for Christians across Niger, that despite being the minority here (< 1% of population), that they would be joyful in their faith and "... that their love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that they may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God."* PHILLIPIANS 1:9-10

## Keeping in Touch

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Please note the change of email address to:

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This is the email address we will use in Australia as well. Please update your address book now.

In Australia, Christmas mail will reach us at 9 Jubilee Drive, Mildura VIC 3500. From January onwards please address mail to PO Box Tarrington VIC 3301. Phone number unknown as yet.

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Note: If corresponding with SIM Offices regarding finance, please quote our SIM member number 12589. For donations to MIDP Finding Solutions quote #NE 97345 or to MIDP Transforming lives quote #NE 89951. Thanks.

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