

2025 Africa University Pilgrimage Log

Day 1-2, Wednesday & Thursday, February 12-13, 2025

Despite considerable snow on the roads and at Dulles airport, 31 intrepid pilgrims gathered for a 14-hour flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. One traveler had fallen at the Albany airport and broken her hip and had to have surgery, but the Africa University Development Office has assured her she will be able to join another pilgrimage with one of the other annual conferences in the future. With an additional 7-hour time zone difference we arrived in Africa on Thursday morning. And after a couple hours at the airport we flew for another 4 hours on to Mutare the capitol of Zimbabwe.

It was a hurry up and wait and extremely long day, as we waited to get on and off the planes and waited to get through customs at the airport in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. For those of you who have never experienced it, it is not easy sleeping on a plane, but we each napped as best we could. As you can imagine we were exhausted by the time we landed the next morning. After the frigid snowy experience as we left Dulles Airport in DC, it was a blessing to get out of the airport and feel some 70-degree weather and warm sunshine as we boarded a coach for a short ride to our hotel.

The Cresta Lodge where we are staying for the first night was fantastic. The staff were friendly and helpful, getting us quickly registered and set up in our rooms for the night. We were encouraged to stay awake for a couple hours until dinner and resist the temptation of falling asleep in a real bed and throwing off our sleep schedules even more than they already had been on the overnight flight. We ended our day with the blessing of a tremendous buffet of African foods and deserts in the hotel dining room.

Friday morning, we are to reload onto the bus for a four-hour drive to the city of Mutare where Africa University is located. I will share more about that tomorrow. But as I close, I want to thank all of the congregations, family, and friends who are keeping us in prayer on this pilgrimage and also taking care of things back home for all of us while we are gone. You are in our hearts and minds as we experience this trip of a lifetime! Thank you.

Day 3, Friday, February 14 Happy St. Valentine's Day!

The day began with the sounds of various birds I could not identify singing. It sounded much more pleasant than traffic and snowplows going by back home. We had breakfast at the hotel and then loaded back onto the bus to take us to Africa University. Everything was lush and green as we passed by fields of corn, tobacco, and other grains. There were cattle with long horns and goats at several places along the way and individual produce stands along the way with tomatoes and other garden produce. We were stopped at various check points along the way and a few toll booths. As we stopped at one a motorcade passed us with police cars with sirens blaring and black SUV's and a black sedan in the center. Enias, our tour guide, thought it was the vice-president's motorcade as the one for the president would be much larger. The further south we drove we encountered huge granite boulders, some stacked precariously upon one another. (I am not the best photographer, so I will need to find the best pictures from the group to add to the log.)

We had a stop at a place called Halfway House, because it was halfway between Harare and Mutare! We got a group photo and had some time to shop in a few small shops set up there. We were advised to mostly look as it would give us an idea of what we might find elsewhere on the trip and if we never found anything better, we could buy it here when we return on Monday afternoon. I did see a wide-brimmed hat that I wanted to keep the sun and rain off during the trip. Others found a few items or some snacks and coffee.

As we drove further south, we began to see the terrain change into foothills and mountains. Enias pointed out that there were strip mines along the mountains for gold and diamonds. I was going to pick up some small rocks as cheap souvenirs, but now I am looking for nuggets! Then we finally arrived and took a meandering drive up and into the campus passing through the fields of crops grown by the university's agriculture department. We drove through the Stone entryway which was built in memory of Rev. James

Spear from the Upper New York conference. (Two of his daughters are with us on this trip.) And then we arrived at the Ubuntu Retreat Center where we unloaded and settled in and had lunch. Then we had a one-hour walking tour of part of the main campus guided by Wesley and several AU students.

To help us get to know one another better, a couple people asked if we could take time to introduce ourselves and then to pair up with someone that we did not know to ask 3 questions about them to be able to introduce them to the group at dinner time. We then had leisure time which some of us used to rest, take short hikes, or try to figure out how to get onto the internet. Two AU students working behind the desk at the Retreat Center figured it out and printed out the new instructions for those of us who are technically challenged! After dinner several of the couples introduced their new friend to the rest of us. Then we had free time for the rest of the evening.

Day 4, Saturday, February 15

When we began this trip, I asked my fellow pilgrims what they were hoping for during this trip. By now some of those hopes and dreams have happened by just coming here. Some others we will accomplish tomorrow when we are to meet the students receiving the scholarships from the million dollars that we had raised as a conference over a period of years. I shared with them that my hope was to find postcards to send home. So far, I have not been successful but I now have 30 other people helping me look! I wrote this hymn as I reflected on hopes and sharing them with others who might be able to help us or encourage us to achieve them. It is to the Common Meter 8686 like “Amazing Grace” or “O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” but this one I used the tune now associated with “In Christ There Is no East or West.”

Is There a Hope for You Today

Jeffrey B. Childs 2/14/2025

(Tune: McKee UMH 548)

Is there a hope, for you today,
A desire, on your heart?
Lift these up to God when you pray.
In prayer is where we start.

Share your desire with others who,
Might help you with this quest,
And ask them about their hopes too.
Together you'll be blessed.

When this day is finally through,
Again reflect and pray.
Thank God for all that you did do.
Then rest for the next day.

Today was a very full day. Our schedule was rearranged as the Vice Chancellor of Africa University, who was to have met us on Monday, had to reschedule and meet with us this morning. He spoke to us about the importance of the school and the importance of being pan-African rather than many other universities in Africa which are only for students in their country. I believe I heard there are 28 countries represented in the student body at AU. He also talked about the importance of the relationship with the United Methodist Church and the support they receive from individuals, churches, and conferences like the scholarships our conference had supplied as well as the building of buildings. The dream or vision is to get all of the students housed at the university, currently some are living in rented apartments in the community and commuting to school. They were pleased this year that they were able to build a dormitory for female students which allowed 92 of them to now live on campus. He invited us to consider helping to build another dormitory through the upper New York annual conference. In our question-and-

answer time with him, the bishop raised the question about the impact of the withdrawal of the USAID funds and its impact on the research in the areas of malaria and tuberculosis. Somewhere around \$1.2 million was cut off which shut down the research into prevention and treatment of these diseases and impacted 40 people who had been employed in those programs who did not get paid in January and will not get paid this month nor for the foreseeable future. The bishop then shared his remorse and embarrassment for what had been done by the freezing of that aid, and we all concurred with his sincere apology.

We then took a bus trip across the valley to the area known as Old Mutare where the United Methodist Church originally set up a hospital, a children's home, and developed boarding schools and schools for children in the community. We met with the hospital administrator who talked about the ministry there to care for people and someone asked about the maternity ward and caring for young mothers and children. He said they assist with about 1000 births a year, some at the hospital and others with travelling nurses, midwives, and even doctors going to the homes.

Then in the afternoon we went to meet the district superintendent at his office in downtown Mutare. He said there were 55 churches in the district with 15 in the city and 40 scattered out in the rural areas. Then we drove up to the Hilltop United Methodist Church which is the mother church of the whole area, because it was the first Methodist Church, and all of the others were branched off from it. We were blessed to hear the music of their choir rehearsing and then the pastor and lay leaders shared with us a bit of their story, their passion, their ministry, and impact in the community. We ended the day with a mountaintop experience at the edge of Zimbabwe where we could look over into Mozambique and the surrounding mountains. We had been told there would be a few artisans there crafting figurines out of soapstone. Several people were pleased to find souvenirs there.

After supper a few of us walked down the steps to the Chapel where the Africa University choir was rehearsing for Sunday morning. A few of our group had gone the night before and met some of the students singing that night who invited them to come back and to sing a song to the choir. Several years ago, we were blessed to hear the choir sing when they toured the US and came to our annual conference session. It was a joy to hear the choir sing again. When they were finished with their rehearsal, they invited us to sing, and we shared the song "Sanctuary" with them.

I thought that ended a very long day. But I was wrong! I had forgotten one of my hopes and dreams was to see the Southern Cross - a collection of four stars roughly in the shape of a cross which points to the direction South. Some of us in the northern hemisphere know how to look for the Big Dipper and use the two stars at the end of the dipper to point to the north star. But down below the equator there is no south star, but by locating these four stars and then extrapolating down the vertical beam of the cross four equivalent measures of the length of that cross it marks the spot on the horizon that is due south from where you are standing. It took a while to find it, but I was blessed to finally see the Southern Cross!

Day 5, Sunday, February 16

Today we started with worship. We have one not feeling well and so a couple stayed behind at the lodge on campus where we have been staying to be with her. They went to the service at the large Chapel at AU. The rest of us headed on the bus to go to worship at St. Peters UMC in downtown Mutare. Along the way we stopped and had a group picture in front of the entryway to the campus which was dedicated to the Rev. James Spear of the former North Central Conference.

We entered a vibrant church to the music of the choir. We were ushered down to the front pews and the bishop was escorted up to the platform with the two pastors and various lay leaders of the church. I was expecting some hymns sung to familiar tunes from the UM Hymnal, but they were all African hymns and much of the service was translated for me by one of the men of the congregation who sat next to me. There were typical announcements and then they took time to invite new people to come forward and introduce themselves followed by a woman coming forward to join the church and a couple other people coming forward to be blessed as they were moving and leaving the congregation.

One of the pastors got up and for about an hour explained that their bishop is retiring (I think) and that they will be going through a process to elect a new one and that may cause conflict. He read a lengthy explanation and had time for the congregation to ask questions. It took about an hour. Earlier I had looked back and noticed the huge balcony was mostly empty with just a few children seated there. But after this Sunday school must have let out as it was mostly filled with children.

A lay leader read the scripture Matthew 17:19-20 about having faith the size of a mustard seed. Then the second pastor got up and preached her sermon. The English translation was offered by my new friend, Marcus, with the gist that with faith in God the mustard seed will grow and all is possible and nothing is too big for that little mustard seed of faith. There were two offerings and people were invited to come down the center aisle and support the church putting their offering in one container for the church or the other one for the mission work of the church. Bishop Hector and his wife Jazelis were introduced to the congregation and the bishop was asked to share a blessing. The service ran for about 3 hours and then we were invited next door to an addition they were trying to build to add additional space onto their existing building. After hearing from the pastor and building committee members who were there with us the bishop again extended a blessing on the work already done and yet to be done.

For a special lunch we drove out to an old country manor that has been turned into a B&B with a great dining facility and tables out on the veranda overlooking the gardens. As with all the meals we have been served in Zimbabwe, this one was also a buffet style and was outstanding. I got the first pot of coffee which wasn't the greatest, but later I was offered a cup at one of the other tables and it was real coffee! (I am hoping someone is taking pictures of the foods!) After lunch we had leisure time to walk around the grounds and some of us found our way in back of the building to the orchid garden. There were exquisite flowers everywhere.

Then we came back to the lodge where we are staying and though we had just eaten a late afternoon dinner, two hours later we were to meet the students who are receiving the scholarships and get acquainted with them. Of the 12 students we were told the one graduate student was off campus and would not be joining us but 9 did and were invited to eat and visit with people connected with the people for whom the scholarships were named. Four of those people and children of two others are actually on the trip. We are hoping the two students who did not show up tonight will be able to join us for lunch tomorrow before we leave the campus.

After that the day ended with talking about a "Love Offering" we will take in the morning and the decision was to support buying new shoes for the 48 students at the Children's Home, critical needs at Africa University and to help the pregnant women who come to the Old Mutare Mission Hospital.

Day 6, Monday, February 17

This was our final day at Africa University. There were options for people to choose from and so a few went back to the Children's Home to spend more time with the children. The older children were in school, but they had a great time with the younger children. Others took the option of sitting in on a lecture or just walking around the campus meeting and talking with students. The bookstore was open, and they had copies of just 1 postcard showing 4 pictures of the school. They were \$5 each! Some of us also went to learn about the malaria study that had been going on at the school until the USAID cut stopped their funding. As I understood it, they were researching which strains of mosquitoes were carrying the disease in various locations and what treated insect nets or insecticides were most effective.

At breakfast we gathered a "Love Offering" to help with any critical needs at the school. It used to be called the Toothpaste Fund as it was started to provide oral hygiene products to students who couldn't afford them. Now it is used for any need that might prevent a student from studying or staying in school. Some wanted money to go buy new shoes for the 48 children at the Children's Home, the director will ensure they are purchased, and we are to get a picture of all the students with their new shoes when they get them. And lastly some wanted to support the work done at the hospital to care for pregnant women awaiting giving birth. We collected \$1914 which the receptionist and I walked over to the finance office to be deposited. While they were double counting the money I sat and talked with the finance officer in

her office. She was very grateful that we had come to AU and that our conference had been so supportive with scholarships. Then I told her that I had been talking with students and trading US dollars for currency from their home countries, but I had none from Zimbabwe. She explained with tremendous inflation rates that money in Zimbabwe changes every so often and that old money loses its value. She remembered she had some in a storeroom and sent an assistant to get it for me. I thought I might get a couple bills to bring home but she had a huge envelope filled with bills and coins. I instantly became a billionaire as I now have a \$10,000,000,000 bill.

Then we had lunch and loaded up for a return trip to Harare with a morning flight to Victoria Falls. More about that tomorrow.

Day 7, Tuesday, February 18

We were up early and checked out of the hotel and headed for the airport to fly to Victoria Falls. It took a while to get through the airport check in and security, and then at the gate we were escorted onto the tarmac where we walk, or were pushed in wheel chairs, out to the plane. It has been a long time since I had last done that! It was roughly a one-hour flight, and here we were at one of the seven wonders of the world. We quickly loaded into a bus and were driven to the falls. For about 3 hours we wandered along the walkway looking at the 16 points where the water of the Zambezi River cascades over the rocks throwing up a mist that we could see from the plane as we approached in the plane. The mist was quite thick the further we went and most of us were soaking wet if we did not have ponchos or umbrellas.

Besides the falls, we also saw some flowers growing near the path and several gorgeous butterflies that people stopped to photograph. There were a few monkeys and then as some of us took the path back to the parking lot we encountered a family of baboons. A predominant male grabbed the bishops backpack and opened it up taking out a small can of potato chips that we had as a snack on the plane. He sat in the middle of the walkway and ate almost the whole can before moving off. Then a female holding a baby came and ate the crumbs that were left over. Once she moved off I went and retrieved the umbrella and poncho that had also been taken and the empty can and we walked away quickly.

After getting everyone back on the bus we were off to a late lunch at the nearby Lookout Café. It overlooked the gorge just down below the falls. A beautiful setting and some claimed it was the best meal of the trip so far. Then we got to our hotel for a quick check-in, and we were off for a sunset river cruise. I was hoping to see a number of birds and was not disappointed! But beyond that there were a number of hippos mostly submerged, but snouts and ears would pop up out of the water and then disappear as we drove by. Then about the time we turned around to return there was a crocodile swimming across the river. As we disembarked the sun was just setting, and we ended a most memorable day. Back at the hotel, many of us were not hungry and preferred to get some rest in our rooms rather than having a late dinner. I did go down to check on people and then to check with the staff about breakfast and ordered it to go for tomorrow as we are to quickly to a safari to see the animals in the morning. The last thing of the day was to return to the room to see that the maid had come in and hung a mosquito net around our beds! I remembered all those years of raising money to provide them through the “Nothing but Nets” campaign and here at the hotel near the river I was sleeping under one!

Day 8, Wednesday, February 19

We began early for a day safari. Breakfast to go was prepared for us by the hotel and we quickly entered the bus to take us to Botswana for our adventure. There was an hour drive of nearly 60 miles from Victoria Falls to the border. There were mostly brush and small trees, not a dense jungle. But what I noticed after a while was there were no houses or people along the road, not even a village or town that we passed through on the journey. There were no real side roads, only a handful of dirt roads or driveways leading off into the brush. We had a three-step process at the border. First we went through border security on the Zimbabwe side, then we stopped and had to step into a tray of liquid to disinfect our shoes for Hoof and Mouth disease, and finally we went through security at the Botswana side. To

save on paying taxes on the bus crossing we left one bus on the Zimbabwe side and picked up two smaller busses to take us on the Botswana side.

For there it was a short ride to the Chobe National Park where we got into five open air jeeps to give everyone a good view of the park and the wild animals. There were several herds of impalas, and then we encountered our first herd of Elephants up close as they came out of the brush and short trees and crossed the road in front of us down to the river. As we worked our way down to the river more and more could be seen and in the grasses along the river and a grassy island in the middle of the river. We were blessed to see a few individual males but mostly family herds of female elephants with a few babies and other younger ones. There were also cape buffalo and hippos, some in the water and some out on the ground. We saw many birds, large and small, along the water and in the trees. Each driver had a radio and was in communication with the others as to the locations of various animals that were spotted. Since it is a free-range area, they could be anywhere. We drove to one spot where one by one the jeeps drove off the road and up among the trees and then backed out, to allow us each to see a small pride of lions just lying in the shade under a tree.

We all stopped under the shade of a few trees at a turnaround spot, and all got out to stretch our legs. The drivers had coolers with bottled water and soft drinks on ice as well as hot water for instant hot coffee or tea in tin cups along with some dry biscuits that were like biscotti. As we talked with one another about what all we had seen, we heard one group had seen giraffes that the rest of us had missed. So, after we finished our break, several jeeps headed back along one of the dirt roads looking for the giraffes and we found a small herd enjoying the leaves among a clump of trees by the road. We also encountered a few wart hogs and several more small herds of impalas and elephants as we wound our way back to the entrance of the park.

After our adventure we had lunch at the Cresta Mowana Lodge. From there we walked down to the river for a two-hour boat safari. There we got a close-up view of a crocodile just sunning itself on the shore. There were more hippos in and out of the water as we rode along. When we left Africa University and began this portion of our trip, the bishop had encouraged us to take this as a sabbath time to relax and enjoy. Here we were blessed to enjoy God's creation on land and on the water.

Then it was time to head back to the buses to head for the border. It was only a two-step process this way as we did not have to step into the disinfectant but did have to have our passports stamped again at both checkpoints. Then back onto the other bus for the return trip to the hotel. Five of us had had enough for the day and opted not to go on for the evening's adventure. But the rest, after a fifteen-minute break to freshen up, got back on the bus.

We then were driven to the Safari Lodge Boma for their famous dinner with African dancing and a drumming spectacular. Due to an early morning departure the group decided to end the evening a little earlier than planned to come back and get rested. For most of us this was a great conclusion to our trip. Twenty of us will be leaving the balmy temperatures and must return to the reality of winter in upper NY! Eleven will be heading on for a couple days in South Africa.

Day 9-10, Thursday & Friday, February 20-21

This is our last day in Zimbabwe and we were up before dawn, checked out of the hotel, and loaded in the buses with our luggage before 6am! We were driven to the Stanley and Livingston National Reserve to look for rhinos. They are protected from poachers inside these huge fenced-in parks. There was no guarantee that we would see one, but the best time is early morning while it is cooler. We first drove by a small family of zebras and impalas grazing together. Then the search for the rhinos began.

We crisscrossed the reserve in four large jeeps on some back trails and dirt roads. It had rained over night and we had to ford a stream that was overflowing the narrow bridge. In the end I think most of us crossed it three or four times. Finally, the driver was alerted that ne had been seen and we drove over to look. I only caught a glimpse as it moved back behind some dense underbrush. A short while later we responded to a sighting of a mother and child, and off we went down muddy trails and across the bridge.

The jeeps converged on the scene and we were finally blessed to see the rhinos eating the leaves off the bushes maybe fifty yards from the road.

There were a few giraffes in the reserve and we came up behind one standing in the road. Fortunately it moved off fairly quickly as we continued our search for the rhinos. There are only eleven of them in this particular park which was fairly large. With all the brush it was hard to see more than a few feet from the road in several areas, and there were many places for them to hide.

After a couple hours of driving all over, looking for animals, we were invited to a brunch prepared over open fires out in the bush. It was a great morning for our last day in Africa. After lunch we headed to the Victoria Falls airport for the trip home for 19 of us and an extended trip on to South Africa for the other twelve pilgrims. We said farewell to one another as we went through security at the airport but talked of reconvening maybe on Zoom or for many of us with a presentation at the annual conference session. Work is being done to help us share one another's photos electronically. Each of us is planning for making one or two presentations to our supporters and friends back home in the coming weeks.

Those of us flying back were surprised to find we were not on direct flights as we had been coming over. So, on our way north to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia we went south to South Africa to drop off and pick up passengers on our way. And coming back from Addis Ababa we stopped in Rome, Italy to change pilots in the middle of the night before flying back to Dulles airport. It was a longer flight but did not feel as bad as the one there last week, maybe because this time we knew what to expect. But in the end, I believe that a good time was had by all. I am hopeful that one of the South African pilgrims can add their reflections to that experience.

Grace and Peace,
Rev. Jeff Childs

Greetings from S. AFRICA

We arrived in South Africa after a wonderful week in Zimbabwe and an especially amazing very early morning seeing wildlife (Eland, Zebras, Giraffes, Elephants and Black Rhinoceros as well as numerous birds etc..) followed by a delicious "Bush Breakfast". On our very full short flight from Victoria Falls to Johannesburg I noticed a couple about our age and the man was wearing a Yamaka. It started me thinking about the current terrible situation of Gaza and Israel, our visit to a concentration camp to the holocaust near Prague, my first visit to the middle east 55 years ago after the 6-day war and the stories of Hitler, Nazis as well as WW 2. We were the last ones off the plane and the last ones on the overcrowded bus to the terminal. I barely fit on carrying our backpacks when suddenly I heard a voice saying give me backpacks helping me to put them where the luggage could go so I was able to grab a handrail. As we swayed and bumped along to the terminal, I felt this wonderful feeling that this bus was for a moment what the world could be. All getting along and helping each other. Today we will learn about the horrors of Apartheid and the life of Nelson Mandela in his hometown of Soweto. Tomorrow, we will journey back to our wonderful country where I have lived the America Dream committed to work to maintain it the beacon of Freedom, Hope and Liberty until my last breath!!

Peace,
Roger Ellis

