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The West Africa Theological Seminary

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Georgia librarians bring hope to impoverished in Africa

by Laura Burtle, Ann Hamilton and Joan Taylor

The West African Theological Seminary Lagos, Nigeria

An account by Joan Taylor
Public Services Librarian
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In November, 2009, I participated in a journey to Nigeria to volunteer in a library. I first heard about the trip in the fall of 2007, when I received an inquiry from a friend about my interest in traveling with her and her husband to a seminary in Lagos, Nigeria. With our church's sponsorship, we began planning, scheduling and coordinating the trip to the West African Theological Seminary (WATS). WATS was founded in 1989 in the Eastern region of Nigeria and relocated to its current property in Apaja Lagos in 2006.

Our team consisted of eight people: three teachers, a former health services administrator, a former technology network supervisor, a nurse, a librarian and a retired government employee. We boarded a crowded nonstop flight from Atlanta to Lagos, and after an 11-hour overnight flight, we arrived in

Nigeria. We were met by a driver and an assistant from WATS. They escorted us from the airport, and we embarked on one of the wildest, most chaotic two-and-a-half-hour rides that I have ever experienced. On the ride, we had to weave around potholes, taxis, motor scooters, pedestrians and street-corner salespeople with wares ranging from pineapples to razors. Somehow we arrived safely at the compound guesthouse located a short walk from the seminary grounds.

The next morning, the seminary's founder, Dr. Gary Maxey, took us on a tour of the seminary grounds. In addition to volunteering in the library, we had opportunities to assist with wall preparation and painting, with campus technology networking and with local patients at a seminary-run health clinic.

On Monday I was introduced to the WATS head librarian, Mrs. Elizabeth (Lizzie) Nwozuzu, along with the rest of the staff. We met to discuss the various needs of the library and ideas of how I could be of assistance. Two projects were considered the most needed: filing and revision of catalog cards, and addressing the

tremendous backlog of books that needed to be cataloged. These books were donations from various places around the world.

The WATS administrators and librarians hope to transfer the library's holdings from their existing card catalog into an online catalog, and given that goal, I didn't feel that correcting and filing catalog cards would be the best use of time. Besides, I confess that I forgot most of the nuances and details of catalog card filing quite a long time ago. We agreed that cataloging and processing books would be a better way to help with the growth of the collection.

There were times when the other members of our team would stop by the library to rest from restoring or painting outdoors in the intense heat. In the library, we had the use of a large electric fan — when the power was working! "Rest" for them actually meant that I gave them a "crash course" in selecting the correct information to be recorded on the forms.

I mentioned to Dr. Maxey that if I could have access to a computer with
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Internet connectivity, I would be able to log in via password to Clayton State University's GALILEO available databases and use the OCLC FirstSearch product, WorldCat, to expedite searches for subject headings and basic call numbers. I was given the use of two laptops, and this helped us tremendously. I showed two of the library staff the tools that I was using and provided them with several links to the OCLC vendor's Web site for potential future subscription and access.

Since the free version of WorldCat doesn't have quite as many library record details as the subscription, it didn't help with the subjects and call numbers.

We still had some issues with the slow speed of the Internet, but it was certainly easier than entirely relying on the book tools. The library staff use three tools to help them in cataloging: Dewey Decimal Classification 20th edition, Sears Subject Headings and a very well used author Cutter booklet. Lagos has issues with utilities and consistent power availability because of the demands of such a large population and also due to local city/government power decisions. Major construction and renovation of the campus buildings and the need for

power supply to operate power tools and machinery create everyday challenges.

Most Lagos households and businesses must rely on generator power for electricity after approximately 7 o'clock in the evening, when city/government-supplied power is suspended for the day. For those of us who have never experienced a daily shut-off of utility power, this was quite an adjustment. These technological challenges on



campus mean that there must be reliable backup files and that software must not be entirely Internet-dependent to function.

I hope that funding to the seminary and technological improvement will allow for more consistent Internet availability to the campus in the future.

There have been some exciting updates to the library since I left Nigeria in November. One important recent development is the purchase and installation of the PrimaSoft software product Small Library Organizer onto WATS library staff laptop computers. This is a multiuser software package, and library staff are beginning to enter the book records using this software. The library-owned laptops are now part

of a file-sharing network. As if the WATS Library staff doesn't have enough projects, they are considering another major decision to migrate from DDC classification to LC classification. The main obstacle is having enough staff and the necessary time to enter the records. Future plans will include expanding the size of the library to the area that currently holds the chapel. The chapel will be moved when construction of its new location is completed.

Another major need is air conditioning to preserve the collection; WATS has received a grant from a major publisher of Christian literature to install air conditioning and some library shelving. The library is also looking toward moving to open source software.

This trip was very fulfilling to me on four different levels: personally, spiritually, culturally and professionally. I have met some wonderful people with whom I now have an ongoing mentoring/consulting type relationship. WATS volunteers in the Atlanta area still have book donations to review in the United States, since it is very expensive to ship large containers overseas. As each of you know, library work is continuous, and I still find it to be a truly awesome opportunity to be able to take the skills and tools of the library profession that I so enjoy and utilize them in a library 7,000 miles from home! Perhaps I will get to travel there again in a few years. ►►