

## **Bob and Annette Whittaker – Eswatini Challenges and Triumphs - May 2024**

Greetings to all,

**Bob:** Our days are busy as you can imagine. I have to run a family practice as well as the cervical cancer program. God has helped us to hire a PA over a year ago who has been an answer to prayer. The clinic however is my joy and seeing people and listening to their stories is what I do best.

Recently a woman came to see me bringing her sick child. While taking the history she told me of an earlier visit to the clinic when she was depressed over her marriage to an African from another country. She said this child is like her husband totally unmanageable, so she had given up trying to resist them. She was from Zambia and had met her husband and married him here in Eswatini. I had counselled her and shared with her from Psalms 42 and 43 pointing out the deep sorrow the writer was feeling when he said ‘why are you so down cast within me oh my soul but then, he says I will yet praise him. So, he is hopeful that things will improve but he does not say when. She said to me, “your words had helped me so much when I was feeling so unhappy thank for your ministry”. It is a joyful thing for me when they report things like this as it does not happen every day - far from it.

**Cervical Cancer:** As Eswatini holds the position of highest HIV rates globally, they also have the highest death rate from cervical cancer. Matsapha is the hotbed for both. In May and June of last year while we were in the States to visit Ozioma and attend a couple weddings, we left the PA (physician’s assistant) and helper to begin a Cervical Cancer Mobilization Campaign pilot project in Matsapha. Ultimately the goal is to see that all women working in Matsapha (from large factories down to individual traders) and those living nearby are initially screened and regularly re-screened for cervical cancer. As a result, and recognition of Bob’s work, he has been kept very busy performing colposcopies, biopsies and LEEPs from those we identify as well as referrals from many hospitals and clinics.

Annette was kept busy with preparing for the annual audit and trying to work with the town council and other partners for support and funding for the Cervical Cancer Mobilization Campaign proposal. After many delays, it became clear that to work with another NGO was untenable as they were under severe financial difficulties as result of offering all their medical services for free. At the same time, it was noted that as the demand for their free services increased, the income to our clinic decreased to the point where we needed to get subvention from the government or cut staff. Late September 2023, just when we came to a breaking point – they also came to a breaking point and had to reduce their free services to only 3 days a week then 1 day a week as they pleaded with the government to help pay off their debts. We prayed about it. Since October our income has gradually increased and continues to increase month by month. God answered our prayers and we are thankful. Meantime, the grant proposal Annette prepared has been sent to USAID for the Cervical Cancer Mobilization Campaign. We are awaiting their response. Please keep the clinic and grant proposal in your prayers.

**Annette’s Report:** Since returning from the States at the end of June last year, we have faced many challenges but also experienced a transformation in the clinic.

**Transformation:** Last year we had shared difficulties in receptivity to the gospel due to widespread immorality but something has changed in the clinic especially among staff. Aside from morning bible lesson and devotions held each morning for patients and staff at the clinic, often Bob also has afternoon Bible studies with various staff if the clinic is quiet. Some have enjoyed the studies but there were some that were just not interested. This may be because many of the staff, to be qualified for their job in counselling and treating others for HIV, have to be successful in their own treatment of HIV so as to be able to empathize and counsel others.

Years ago, I had developed some material on “Physical Birth to Spiritual Maturity”, which I used for various bible studies in Nigeria, the US and in Eswatini. After seeing the tremendous growth and understanding in a small group study at the house, I longed to share it with the staff. Long-story – short, in December I decided to do the introduction with the entire staff then continue in small groups once I bought each staff member a bible and highlighter for the study. Before Christmas I introduced the study with the first 5 lessons. On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> lesson as I drove the very short distance to the clinic some thoughts came into my head which I promptly typed upon arrival. I closed the 5<sup>th</sup> lesson that day with this essay entitled “A love letter from God” which I also posted on Facebook for Christmas. As a result of the intro and love letter, at least four of the staff turned their lives over to Jesus and requested baptism. Since then, staff have repeatedly been asking for the bibles and are eager for the lessons to continue. I searched everywhere for NIV and Siswati language bibles but they had been out-of-stock across the country since early December. (The stock of bibles was exhausted after a country-wide bible competition in November). I finally was able to get the NIV bibles last week in Eswatini but Siswati bibles are not expected to arrive from the printing house in South Korea until June. This past weekend when Bob and I took a few days in South Africa to celebrate our birthdays, I was very excited when I found Siswati bibles in Nelspruit and at a discount on the day I bought them. Happy birthday to me – I will now celebrate by giving them all bibles for my birthday next week then we can continue.

In their desire to encourage each other in their new spiritual growth, at the end of last year even before further study, the staff had requested to use the church building during their lunch hour. It is absolutely amazing that since early March, ALL the staff and volunteers at the clinic of their own accord, have begun to use of the church building every lunch hour for singing, worshiping God, praying, teaching, exhortation and testimonial. Although they all say that their spiritual renewal is because of the lessons, it may also be in part to what happened in the first 5 weeks of the year.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, one of our staff, Lindo, collapsed into a coma at work. It was a diabetic coma but she had not told anyone, even her family that she was diabetic and had not been on treatment. She was rushed to RFM, the nearest government hospital, and sent home on treatment. On Sunday night, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, Bob was called as Lindo was rushed to the clinic. It was surprising how many staff appeared at the clinic late on a Sunday night. Lindo was again rushed to RFM. Her kidneys were failing and she was told to wait for a bed at one of the only 2 hospitals in the country that offered dialysis. I visited her very often getting her anything she needed. Her first request was for a NIV bible. Not finding one in any shop, I brought her one from the house along with an audible bible and earphones. There was no end to her thanks. I confirmed that she was a baptized believer. Finally, after 3 weeks she was to be transported to Hlatikhulu Hospital on a Friday night over an hour away. After they prepared her for transport, I bade a tender goodbye. Early the next morning, her sister called that she is still at RFM. At 11:30 while I was working as the cashier on the busiest Saturday in the clinic’s history, her sister phoned that Lindo was calling for me; before I could get there, Jesus had taken her. Reportedly her last words were calling for me. The clinic staff and family were overflowing with appreciation for what I had done for Lindo. This shock and my example may also be a factor in their new and renewed faith and devotion to God. Please pray for the bible classes, their continued transformation and spiritual growth in Christ.

Thank you all for your support and prayers. If anyone would like to see Annette’s material on physical birth to spiritual maturity and the essay, “A love letter from God,” please let us know.

In Service to Him,

Bob and Annette