

# The Difficult Birth of the First M.E. Weekend in Zambia

From the diary of Fr. Ward Van Haegenborgh, CICM

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## **1980:**

The first Weekend was planned for November 7-9 or 14-16. October 20th we had to make the decision to cancel the Weekend indefinitely: we are not ready, we have nobody who can really make the Weekend his first priority.

## **1981:**

New dates are fixed for the first Weekend: September 11-13 and 18-20. During our meeting held in Salisbury (Zimbabwe), it is decided that South Africa will reach out to Zambia.

- Beginning of July: Gavin and Sandy phone me: it would take a very long time to have the visas for Zambia arrive here in South Africa. Can't you have it done faster in Zambia itself? Answer: I don't know, but let's try and send the application forms as soon as possible.

- Three weeks later, I phone Gavin and Sandy: up to now, no application forms have arrived. What is happening? Answer: we just got the forms through Zambian Airways. They are filled in by the couples and will arrive soon.

- Second half of August: the application form of only one couple arrived. I go to Lusaka to find out how long a time it will take before the authorities will deliver the visas. A lot of people's opinion: you never will have the visas in time, it takes an awful long time. . . As a matter of fact I arrive at the office at 8 a.m., am kindly asked to come back at 3 p.m. to fetch the visas. No problems.

- The application form of the Goethals' couple arrives in the beginning of September. It becomes clear to me: it's impossible to send the visas back to South Africa. They never will arrive in time. Then a new call from Durban tells me that the couples will arrive on Thursday, September 10 at 7 p.m. on flight BP (Botswana Airlines) 242. I assure Gavin: no problems, I'll be at Lusaka Airport with the visas.

- September 9: I arrive in Lusaka at 2 p.m. by car. At 3 p.m. the Immigration Officer assures me that the Goethals' visas will be ready at 10 a.m. in the morning of September 10. Everything is fine . . . I relax.

- September 70: 7 p.m. the plane is supposed to arrive. I am at the airport at 6:30. One never knows. . . No plane, no news, growing disquiet, restlessness . . . At 9:15 finally an official communication of the information desk: the flight is delayed, indefinitely, due to bad weather in Johannesburg.

- September 11: 9:15 a.m.: No time for feelings . . . action. I have to reach home as soon as possible in order to inform the couples not to go to the venue (the venue-retreat house- is Francisdale, at about 80 km. from the Kitwe area) . Before starting my 4 hour drive to Kitwe, I pass by the Catholic Secretariat to inform Dick Cremins (an encountered priest) about the situation, to ask him to take the visas of the couples and to help out, whenever needed. I don't have the phone number of Gavin and Sandy with me, try to phone home to get it, but can't get through. . .

12:45 p.m.: In Ndola. The speed regulations haven't been observed, believe me. I arrive at the White Fathers House. The first thing to do: inform the Bishop not to come to the Weekend. The answer: Dick Cremins phoned for you: the 2 couples have arrived at Lusaka and will be in Ndola at 4 p.m. The only thing I need is the number of the visas . . . in my hurry I had forgotten to give the visas to Dick. I don't feel tired anymore . . . Life is beautiful. I relax . . .

4:00 p.m. At the Ndola Airport. The first flight from Lusaka is not at 4 but at 6 o'clock . . . back to the White Fathers house.

5:00 p.m.: Phone from Lusaka: Dick gives the unbelievable news: my message of this morning is wrong: the couples are not in Lusaka but are expected to arrive at 4 p.m. But up to now . no news at the airport . . Once more, all hope is gone . . . I feel . . . Too late now to inform the couples . . . nothing can be done anymore.

6:00 p.m.: Back to the airport in Ndola. One never knows if . . . but no miracle: no couples.

6:30 p.m.: At Francisdale: the Bishop and two couples are waiting . . . Disappointment. Two phone calls more to Lusaka: the airport and Dick Cremins: no news at all from the Botswana flight . . . Dick insists once more: I need the visas otherwise the couples, arriving tomorrow (???) will not be allowed to enter the country.

8 p.m.: Other disappointment for me: Out of 16 couples, only 10 had arrived. We offer them something to eat and . . . send them back home, for another 80 km. drive . . . It's official now: NO WEEKEND . . . I feel destroyed and tired.

10:00 p.m.: at the Bishop's house: the Bishop himself makes photostats of the visas . . . To make things sure. He suggests I not drive to Lusaka, but instead to take the plane . .

10:30: At the White Fathers house: I'll go to the airport tomorrow morning.

- September 12: at 8 a.m. I am at the airport, ready to go to Lusaka if needed. The first person I see at the airport is a Maryknoll priest on his way to Kenya. The first good news in a long time. I give him my letter, rush back to the White Fathers house in order to inform Dick to go to the airport, to ask for the letter at the information desk and to help the couples if they arrive at 11:15 a.m. as announced the day before.

12:30 p.m.: phone: only couple one arrived, the Mtshali's. The Goedhals'???? No news . . . All the flights for Ndola are full, they will have to take the coach . . . a 6 hour drive from Lusaka to Kitwe.

1:30 p.m.: another call: the Goedhals will arrive tomorrow, September 13 at 3:30. I feel relieved.

5:00 p.m.: I arrive home. They had a lot of phone calls from Durban, Bloemfontein . . . and didn't know what to answer . . .

10:00 p.m. : Zandy and Oupha arrive safe and well . . a famous hug . . .

- September 13: 12:30 p.m.: I phone Dick . . .remember the Goedhals' couple . . .? But Dick is out.

1:30 p.m.: Phone from Lusaka: Dick has two tickets but can't tell by now if the Goedhals will arrive at Ndola or at Kitwe airport. . .

5:30 p.m.: Dick: The couple arrived and they are on their way to Kitwe.

6:00 p.m.: Finally the team is complete . . . Lynn and Louis arrived fine and safe. Zandy and Oupha: left Pietermaritzburg Thursday September 10, at 8 in the morning. Stranded in Johannesburg where they passed the night in a hotel, were flown to Gaborone (Botswana) where they passed another night and arrived in Kalulushi

10:15 on Saturday night. Lynn and Louis; Left Durban on Thursday noon, stranded in Johannesburg that same evening, were flown to Gaborone and back on Friday, passed another night in Johannesburg and arrived in Kalulushi on Sunday, at 6:15 p.m., September 13.

**The Weekend was planned September 11-13 . . .**

**The Weekend was finally held September 18-20**