

## EXCERPTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF JOHANNA VEENSTRA

*The Christian Reformed Church has learned a lot in the 100 years since 1919, especially in the areas of racism and embracing indigenous leadership. We recognize and lament the presence of unhealthy and sinful actions and attitudes in all cross-cultural mission contexts, whether at home or abroad, both today and at the beginning of the 20th century. Resonate purposefully seeks to challenge those actions and attitudes by holding reconciliation and locally-led ministry at the forefront.*

*While we recognize these realities, we admire Johanna for her courage in challenging the status quo. We celebrate Johanna's enthusiastic response to the work God called her to in equipping the Nigerian church. We appreciate the passion she had for connecting people to God's mission, and we emulate the trust she had in God. Her example can inspire and encourage each one of us as we seek to answer God's call in our own lives.*

### October 9, 1919 (Miss Veenstra off for the Sudan)

Dear friends:

By the time you read this letter, I shall, the Lord willing, be on my way to Africa. No doubt many wonder why I did not go before, but it takes weeks and often months to get the necessary papers, and to have them signed by the proper persons. Being a U.S. citizen, and both my parents having been born here, I did not expect to experience the difficulty I had, but am rejoicing that the time for sailing is fast drawing near. My ticket is purchased to go Oct. 2 on the s.s. "Mauretania" to England. I shall have to go from America to England alone, but from there on other missionaries may be sailing in one party. There are so few young people in America at present who are prepared and willing to go as missionary to Africa. Let us rejoice that God is working mightily among our own boys and girls, since many are now in training for definite missionary service, and let us count it a great privilege if the Lord permits us to witness for Him at home or abroad.

Should God spare my life I hope to keep in touch with you from time to time through the pages of the Banner. And should it please the Lord to take away the breath of life, I have but one desire, and that is, that He may speedily send into the heathen darkness of Central Africa other young people more worthy than I.

Ready to live, yes ready to die,

Willing to serve on earth or on high.

**JOHANNA VEENSTRA**

## May 12, 1920 (Joy and Sorrow in Africa)

It was the last Saturday in April—a very warm day—and just as I arose from the breakfast table, in came a black man, out of breath, tired and anxious, handing me a note marked: “Urgent.” He had come 25 miles on the bicycle of a lady missionary, and the note requested that I come at once to this station. There was an emergency case, the doctor had left two weeks before for the United States and they were not sure that the government doctor (who was stationed 25 miles out another direction) was at home. In great haste I gathered a few articles together, filled a water bottle, took the wheel the messenger brought, and was off. First there was a river to cross, and with the help of one of our boys to hold the wheel, I went over in a tiny canoe (only the trunk of a tree dug out). Then a swamp of about half a mile, in which I could not use the bicycle. At last I started to ride—pushing and praying for 25 miles through the bush, on a narrow path, often rugged, and mostly up-grade. Gradually the sun became hotter, and my arms burned to blisters.

I came to a broken bridge which three natives were busy repairing, and at the sight of me, instead of helping to get the wheel over, one ran into the bush, one ran up a tree—and the third stood stock-still. I greeted this one, but no response. They were probably hill people and most likely had never seen a white person; and the wheel also helped to frighten them. Being a woman and alone, they quite naturally concluded I was a spirit.

About 1:30 noon I arrived at the station, and the tea-pot was a most welcome sight. I remained there about a week, caring for one of the mission girls who was critically ill.

While here one afternoon we had a Christian wedding of two natives. They were among the first of this station to be baptized. The girl was one who had been sold into slavery, but who had been freed by the government and sent to our Freed Slaves' Home. It was blessed to see this Christian ceremony, especially after having witnessed a native marriage a few weeks previous. The young man is one of our native evangelists preaching the Gospel to his own tribe.

But half an hour before the wedding ceremony a messenger came to tell us one of the patients had just died. It was a young man (black) about 17 years old, who had come to the mission a week before—dying with cancer. He came miles and miles to seek relief, and was here without home, friend, money or food. The mission gave him a small hut, sent him food, and sought to ease his pain. And in the last days of his earthly pilgrimage he heard the “old, old story,” but very new to him, “of Jesus and His love.” He remembered the words and could repeat them the next day. Eternity alone will unveil whether he was chosen of God to hear of Calvary and to believe before entering the grave.

Due to the heat, it is necessary in this country to bury almost immediately. So from the wedding in the mission chapel, another lady missionary and I went to prepare the corpse for burial, while the two white men of the station went to dig the grave. There are so many emergencies in this country that one must constantly be prepared to “be all things to all men.”

The body was carried some ten minutes to the little mission cemetery. Several black boys and men stodd about and to them the missionary spoke on the words, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in." And with a word or prayer this ceremony of sorrow was ended.

Friends, so it is ever! Within our soul there is a jubilant note because of our redemption by grace. But what our eyes behold day in and day out, makes the spirit heavy, brings forth many a sigh. O, that we might all have the compassion Christ would have us show to the "sheep without a shepherd."

O, that we might know how to pray for laborers. Four new stations have just been given us by the government, but—no one to send. Missionaries to go home for rest—but alas, no one to continue the work until they can return.

Is it nothing to you?

## January 13, 1921

I would like to assure you that I am not in need of sympathy. Aside from the parting with church, loved ones and friends, there has been no sacrifice on my part. The Lord has thus far given me very good health, and has also enabled me to bear comfortably the great heat of the dry season. Also there is no lack of food, though not the variety and not some things which we commonly have in America. But in season there is delicious fruit and plenty of it at the cost of a few pennies. I am sorry for some of our young people who would gladly come out here as a missionary, but the Lord calls them to stay at home. With still deeper sorrow my heart goes out to some of you young people who may read these lines who have heard the call, had the opportunity, but refused to obey. The sorrow is because you are missing that intense joy that floods the soul when we are in the service of the King.

Unspeakably precious to me is the fact that at present there are in our denominations dozens of young people who are entering training for the work of the ministry, the work of a Christian school teacher, or the work of a missionary. May we all have grace to walk carefully and prayerfully in these days when in our midst the work of the Holy Spirit is so evident on one hand, and when on the other hand the world is trying so hard to lure multitudes of our young people astray.

At the end of this year's absence from the States I can only say, "Praise the Lord!" In everything his grace has been sufficient; He has abundantly, yea, exceedingly above expectation, supplied every need.

With Christian love to you all,

## February 1926 Women and Missions (The Daughter of Prayer)

Today I would introduce you to the first woman baptized in this district. Every rule is subject to changes, and with this woman we departed from the written regulation that a candidate for baptism must be able to read the Gospel, and must have learned the first catechism of 100 questions and answers. Because she was well on in age there were many white hairs, and her

face was wrinkled with years. Her name is Pa'ana. She is a widow. She earns her own living by buying foodstuff and selling it again in the market. Upon first hearing, the Word of the Lord was "sweet to her taste," and very soon the Savior became her personal Lord and she broke away from the old life of darkness and heathendom. She has been a Christian for over five years now. After attending the services regularly for a time, and being instructed by the other Christians, she desired baptism. She was so earnest in her desire and so sure of the salvation of the Lord being her portion, and so pleading, that it was decided to grant her request. To this day no one thinks it has been a mistake. During these years she has been tested and found faithful.

When first I returned this term, I had her come out to visit me. She so much wanted to learn to read the Word of the Lord. Several of the Christians had tried to teach her, but each one gave up the task as it appeared so hopeless. She wept, and said, "No one has patience with me to make me read; does Jesus not want me to read His words?" Then I questioned her all about the Lord Jesus, His birth, His life on earth, His death, ascension, the future life, etc., and to my utter surprise I found her well grounded in the important fundamentals of our faith. Then I said to her: "Now, Pa'ana, you may forget about learning to read. You have another work. You must tell others what you know of Jesus, and you must pray for all the work of the Lord." Her heart rested and she has not again asked to be taught "a-e-i-o-u."

She did not hesitate to speak for the Lord, and soon the women in the marketplace hated her for leaving the old religion. They tried to refuse her a place where she might sit and sell her goods. They scorned her; they reviled her; they put her to an open shame many a time, but her eyes were fixed. Away from the turmoil of a busy market, and away from the tongues of sinful women, she looked unto her Christ.

Oh, the power of the Gospel of Jesus—how it transforms lives! Never does this old soul stay away from services except when she is ill. Friends, listen—and she gives more than a tithe to the Lord. Every Sunday, without fail, she places her tiny envelope in the collection plate. However poor, and whatever she may have to deny herself, her Lord's gift is never lacking. There are faithful widows today who still give their mite, and from the "great white throne" on high the Savior looks down, and "in the book of remembrance" it is written.

One Christmas we came out of the chapel and one came to me and said: "Here is a sheep, Baturiya; Pa'ana wants to give it to the Lord for a Christmas thankoffering." The tears came to my eyes; I could hardly respond, as I was quite shocked. A sheep! How could she gather her pennies from her trading to buy a sheep? How many weeks did she have to save to give this present to the Lord Jesus? It was over and above her tithe, it was an extra free-will offering. The Lord reward her!

One day I went to her hut, and enquiring whether she was in, I was told "She is at prayer in her hut." Then I saw the grass mat (door) let down, and I heard an audible voice in prayer. Evidently she always prays aloud. That she has set times for prayer is quite generally known. And one day in speaking of something I asked, "Who did that?" and I was told "The daughter of prayer did it." I said, "Who?" and I got the same answer. I then said, "Pray, who is the daughter of prayer?" and they, the native Christians, said, "Oh, that is the name we have given to Pa'ana. Did you not know, Baturiya? We all call her that name all the time." And now I hear it often: "The daughter of prayer greets you." Is it not a lovely name! A black gem in Central Africa, uneducated, poor, but a living epistle known and read of others to such an extent as to be

given a new name, a glorious name,—“The Daughter of Prayer.”

“He that overcometh I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name.”

## March, 1928

Something new has been done this year. Something I have never heard of before in our Mission. Our native Christians here in Takum have composed six Christian songs to their native tunes. The natives have certain tunes and words which they sing while beating, or farming, or playing, or grinding corn, etc., etc. Our Christians have taken these tunes and composed words about the Lord Jesus to be sung to them. And what splendid singing it is. So much more suitable to them than our tunes, especially at this stage of the work. It takes a month often to teach a single one of our tunes, but only an evening to teach these native Christian songs. The people already have the melody, they only need the new words. And now as we go about in the district we teach these songs. In different directions we are hearing the people sing praises unto our Lord, and asking to be taught more! Who can tell what blessing this may bring forth in the near future! Surely the enemy will receive one defeat when the name of our Savior sounds over these cannibal hills! Praise ye the Lord!

## June, 1928 (Our Trek Through the Hills)

How many times I have longed that I might be able to convey to you certain impressions which we experience out here in the heart of Africa.

Just now we are again on trek—packing and unpacking every morning. The path is not fit for a wheel, so we are walking from one place to another. Some stages are short and easy, and we just enjoy the exercise in the cool of the morning. But when it comes to a hike of eight or nine miles, much of which is rocky path, and one’s feet blister and bleed, one can hardly say with honesty that it is all pleasure.

This morning, however, the distance was not long,—only about four miles. We camped at the foot of a large mountain, and were awakened several times during the night by the barking of the monkeys. We arose before dawn and very early we were walking along the narrow trail. The region is very mountainous and there are many streams. Some of them are without water now during the dry season, and we step down and climb up on the other side. Then again we find water and a bridge of a few logs—over which we walk, at times with a boy in front of us, whose shoulder we hold in order to balance with ease. We are sometimes disturbed by a deeper stream without a bridge, and have to take off shoes and stockings, and wade through. Should it be too deep for us to do this, we have two strong men make a chair with their hands and carry us across.

At last we sight the grass roofs of a group of huts and rejoice that we are nearing the end of another trail. But there is still a climb as this village is built on the slope of a very high mountain. On and on—stepping up the rocks; a little going and then a little patient resting and looking

down over the valley. How glorious! Mountains on three sides of us! On one occasion a missionary passed through this village, but we are the first white folks to sleep here.

The chief smiles and greets us. The best hut in the village is given to us, but when our camp beds are up, our small table, a chair and the boxes, the squeeze is like that of the “sleeper” on a Pullman car. So we just sleep outside, and it being moonlight, we enjoy it.

Toward evening we have a look around, and for the most part we see rocks. Many huge boulders, and hundreds of rocks of all sizes. The walls about the compounds are built of stones; the foundations of the huts are of stones; stones as a substitute for chairs; stones to pound and grind the grain on; yes, and when we gather the people for preaching, they suggest we all sit on the flat top of a tremendous boulder,—a stone for a chapel!

We ask the chief to gather his people and suggest that our message is for the women as well as the menfolk. The men keep coming from every side. Some of them have only a small loin-cloth on their body, while others have a monkey or deer skin as their covering. Four women have courage to draw near. The others are mostly in hiding. A false rumor, no doubt started by Satan, has gone among them to the effect that we count the women and then steal some of them. Such bondage! Such fear! Our daily prayer is that Jehovah God will snap these fetters and set these prisoners free.

“Hear, O ye people, the Lord Jehovah is one God!” That is the beginning of every message among these people who have never heard the gospel, or who have heard only once or twice. Then we tell how God has revealed Himself in His Word. “All have sinned...there is none that doeth good, no not one.” We tell of how Satan deceived our first parents. We enlarge upon the results of sin, and tell how God’s holiness demands that sin shall be punished. Then we tell of Jesus, of how He died and rose again—God’s Lamb slain for our sin. We teach them a very short prayer, somewhat like this:

“Jesus, forgive me my sins, sit in my heart, and teach me of Thyself.”

In some places we teach them a song in their own tongue, and composed to one of their own native tunes. The tune being familiar to them, and the words simple, they are able to grasp it readily. It is good to see the old men sing and for the first time in their life use the name of our Savior—Jesus.

We rejoice with great joy over one of our Dzompere young men who is accompanying us, and whom the Lord is using in the preaching of the Gospel. When Danyelu died we prayed that God would be pleased to raise up another, and He has heard our pleading. How kind and good is our Father! Some day I will tell you of this young man.

After the message is given, we ask them questions to impress the words more deeply, and we are continually encouraged to note how well they have understood.

But let me assure you, beloved friends, these are dark places. If it were not that we know our God is omnipotent, we would despair. Blessed assurance. “His is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen.”

## July - August, 1928 (“Once I Was Blind”)



Just recently we buried the oldest member of our little flock of Christians. He was an old blind man. During my last term he would come on Sunday morning, sit outside the door of our mud chapel, and after service we would give him two pennies from the collection plate. He was very grateful, and was not like an ordinary beggar. Indeed, he never asked for alms, but we gave to him regularly. But in this way he came under the sound of the gospel, and the Lord worked in his heart to that extent that he desired to confess the Lord publicly. This he did.

Being one of our number we no longer gave him a couple of coppers each Sunday, but our Christians saw to it that he did not lack. Every day the elders sent to him from their own supply, and with no request of the missionary, a bowl of gruel and a dish of food. It made my heart glad to hear this and to note their care for the old blind man. Besides this we would give him a little money now and again to get firewood. Only in very rare cases do we give away money, and only where there are no relatives to care for the person in need. This man had not a single relative. And being blind, he was dependent upon what others would do for him.

Having made public confession of Christ, he was asked to come inside the Chapel. It would not do for him to sit without. On Sunday morning some one would go and fetch him and lead him with a stick into the house of the Lord. He always sat near the door in the same place. After the service he would be led to greet the missionary. At times I have visited him and also had him come to me to ask him questions about the way of life, and to give him a little instruction.

Last month he took ill. We were away on trek. He grew worse. And on Saturday he crawled out of his hut to come and sit in the sun a little while. Then he decided to crawl back, and when he got to the door he swooned and fell. Later he was found there dead. Our elder Istifanus found him thus, and carried him into the hut, laying the corpse on the mat on the floor. Early Sunday morning, as I was preparing to go to Takum, I received a short note telling me the news of the death of this old man. Let me give you in conversation form what followed as soon as I arrived in Takum.

"Welcome, welcome, white lady. Blessings upon your coming." This greeting was from the elder.

"Thank you. I am glad to see you," I replied, and proceeded to go through the regular greetings.

"Have you received the news, white lady, that our brother died yesterday?" enquired the elder.

"Yes, I received the news this morning," I said.

Then in detail I heard all about the illness, the death and the burial.

"Who buried him?" I enquired.

"We, the 'followers', did it all."

"Did you have a service?"

"Yes, we all gathered about the grave, we sang and also I gave a short talk, and offered prayer."

"Where did you bury him?"

"We dug a grave beside that of Danyelu, and put him there."

"Have you asked the Chief for a plot there outside the town for a Christian burial ground?"

"Yes, after you told us to do so, we went, and we cleared a square piece of ground, and put stones to mark it. We put stones at the grave of Danyelu also."

"Was the old man conscious while he was ill, and did he think he might die, and did you elders visit him?"

"We visited him daily. On Friday when I was there, he said he would not arise from this bed of illness. I asked him to look to Jesus. He said, 'I am not afraid. I believe in Jesus. And when I die He will take me to His own home. The Lord is in my heart.' I then talked to him from the Word and had prayer with him before I left."

"He was blind here on earth, but you think we may believe that he now sees Jesus?" I questioned.

"We believe so, white lady."

I too believe fully that he has gone to be with the Lord, and at once the words of that old familiar hymn rose in my memory,

"Once I was blind, but now I can see; The Light of the world is Jesus."

But what I want you to see is the wonderful leading of the Holy Spirit. The care the Christians gave this old man while he lived they did by the prompting of the Spirit. No missionary asked them to do it. Neither were they paid a penny for it. On their own accord they visited the sick and comforted him, and pointed him to the Lord of Glory, and prayed with him. They did not draw back before cold death, but lovingly wrapped up the body, carried it through the town to the burial spot, and there conducted a Christian service. The man was poor, very poor. No earthly treasures were left to be divided. In this land the poor are despised. But God's Spirit teaches His children that they are to despise no man, and surely not one of the household of faith—no, not even the least in that household.

Words fail me to tell you what rejoicing there is in my heart at the way our baptized Christians are taking on the responsibility of the Lord's work. They serve freely, cheerfully, and devotedly. Many a time they make me feel ashamed.

How do you feel, beloved reader?

## January, 1929 (Miss Veenstra's Letter)

It is not quite fair for us missionaries to tell you of all our own difficulties and not acquaint you with the problems and hard places that are set before our native Christians. We tell you of our own to encourage your help in intercession. Not because we want pity. I think we are the last people on earth to want any sympathy. Or should I say to need any. Ours is a glorious task, a supremely happy service, and we do not need sympathy.

On more than one occasion I have told you that we are striving toward the founding of a native church which will be self-supporting and self-governing. To that end we have the envelope system, and train our Christians in systematic giving, and we are glad that most of



them give faithfully a full tithe. To that end we also have installed elders who share with us the responsibility of discipline, etc. [Compare Rev. DeKorne's article about the Korean plan, etc.]

Recently our chapel was needing some repair, and I simply told the elders that it was up to them to gather the Christians and see to the matter. They did so. Not a penny did it cost, and not an hour of our supervision. They took entire charge and arranged it so that all the Christians would have a share in repairing their own house of worship. The elders have charge of the preaching at Kwambai, and every Sunday they have to appoint the one who is to go. I have left them with this responsibility now for over six months. Of course, they take their own turn in regular course as well as the others. And gradually on we are adding responsibilities so as to make them feel that the work is theirs.

With every matter of discipline I counsel with the elders, and get their thought of it first. Often I leave them to do all the work with the person needing discipline. When a person—one who has confessed the Lord publicly, even though he may not yet be baptized—wanders into some gross sin, it is necessary to apply discipline. That person is prayed for, admonished, and personally dealt with until one of two things happens. He either repents or remains indifferent and obstinate. If he repents and asks to be allowed to confess his sin publicly, he is given opportunity to do this. I find such a service very hard. Whenever I have to take a meeting and announce that one of the flock has sinned, but is ready to confess his sin, I find myself taxed to the utmost. A suitable Scripture is read, the person is asked to stand before the people present and "speak his heart." Then another Scripture is given to encourage the one who has sinned and prove that if we earnestly confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and after this I call on one of the elders to pray that God may accept the confession and cleanse each one of us with the blood of His Son. So far, in most cases of discipline, we have had the joy of seeing the person publicly confess his sin.

However, now and again we see a heart stubbornly refuse to obey the authority of the elders and the Word of God, and we come to the place where this one has to be publicly crossed from the roll. If the missionary conducts a meeting as I just told you of and it is hard, then a meeting where one publicly crosses off the roll a hard-hearted member is still more painful. I carefully read over all the form of excommunication in the back of the Psalter, and found that no person should be lightly crossed off. I could not use this form, of course. But I would read a Scripture, announce that one of our number was on this day to be crossed off, and carefully explain the reason, and prove the justice of our dealing from the Word of God, and then have prayer for the one who is being crossed off and for all of us that we may be "kept by the Holy Spirit."

We had occasion to cross off a catechumen last month, and I wanted to give the responsibility of the meeting to our leading elder Filibus. I felt the time had come when they should take such a meeting. It would make them feel the intense difficulty of such a task and urge them to flee unto the Lord for help. It would show to the other Christians that the elders have this authority of "ruling the church" and "keeping the flock of God."

After it was all decided and Filibus agreed to take the meeting, I said that the person in question should be notified of the fact that on the coming Sunday he would be crossed off the roll. I asked: "Will you send him a message, or do you wish me to call him and tell him?" Istifanus answered: "It is best that we call him to us, and face to face, and eye to eye, we tell him of it, and warn him that if he continues to harden, his end will be 'the fire!'" This also made

me feel that the Lord is on our side, for they were choosing to do the hard thing themselves, and not letting me to do it, and instead of a note (the person lives four miles away), they would tell him personally.

Now I can assure you that these elders are not hard-hearted men. If you could hear them pray for any person under discipline, or in trouble, you would be convinced of this. And while some of my fellow-missionaries judge me to be very "severe", I know that our three elders are also convinced that we need careful discipline if we are to have a strong church. I rejoice that the Lord has shown this to them.

And so while they are young in the faith, young in their position as leaders, they are being taught of the Spirit, and I commend them most earnestly to your constant intercession, that they may abide faithfully in the things which have been entrusted unto them, and that they may rule well the flock of our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ.