Report for the Closed Milltown UMC’s Former Congregation:

*The Long Journey of the Milltown UMC Cross and Paraments from Milltown, Indiana to Kabimba, DRC*

Dear friends of the Milltown UMC, Milltown community, and Indiana Conference!

I’m thrilled to be able to send you a first-hand report about the long journey of your altar cross and liturgical altar cloths from Milltown UMC. After many false starts and detours, they finally reached the United Methodists in Kabimba, Democratic Republic of Congo. These beautifully embroidered linen paraments and cross which blessed the Milltown UMC sanctuary for many so many years will now bless the sanctuary of a thriving, young congregation. Thanks to the gracious financial gift your church made when you decided to closed,\* another congregation on the other side of the world has been able to start building a beautiful new “Milltown Memorial” Bethel UMC. At the close of the final worship service, it was sad to see the cross and paraments cleared off the altar. However, that was not the end of their purpose in worship. You wanted to send them to carry your spirit to the altar in the new church in DRC.

These symbolic treasures of new life traveled more miles than anyone expected since the final Milltown UMC worship service on June 30, 2019. I hoped to go and present them in Kabimba on Easter Sunday, 2020. With all my travel plans set, I carefully wrapped the cross in the altar cloths and placed them in my carry-on. I would take no chances that they get delayed, lost, or stolen before Easter. Sadly, they did not reach Kabimba in time for Easter.

This heavy cross and linen paraments had an extended layover in Slovenia where I stopped to visit Rev. Dr. Taylor Denyer, co-founder and director of Friendly Planet Missiology. They stayed nestled in my bag, ready for the next flight. Unfortunately the airport and borders shut down on March 17, the very day scheduled to fly on to Africa. As it became clear the shut-down could go on awhile, I decided to set up a corner altar in my bedroom. Over the next three and a half months, my altar was draped with your purple cloth during Lent, then white for Easter, and finally green altar cloths for ordinary times. The cross shone brightly on the altar between my Bible and one of Milltown UMC’s hymnals. They helped me focus on God as I prayed and led on-line Bible studies, devotions, and worship from that corner throughout those months.

When the Ljubljana airport and borders finally reopened in mid-June, I carefully repacked the cross and altar cloths into my carry-on bag once again. I hoped to go straight of DRC where I was to start my new appointment in the Tanganyika Conference on July 1. Unfortunately, the DRC was still closed to travelers. Another ticket had to be cancelled. So, I returned to the US with the same carry-on, feeling a bit defeated and deflated, and wondering if and when this cross and altar cloths would ever get to Kabimba.

Congo’s borders opened again in October, and I purchased one more plane ticket with a prayer that I would actually fly this time. This time I had many more donations and things I would need for the next year or so. I didn’t know when a vaccine was coming and when I might travel home again. First among the many things I packed were the Milltown cross and altar cloths. This time I had to pack them in checked luggage, so I bought a hard-shell suitcase. The cross and altar cloths kept up with me from Indianapolis to Chicago, and Chicago to Doha, Qatar. They accompanied me to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, where I was delighted to see each of the bags coming around on the luggage belt. Because I next had to fly a small plane with only a carry-on, I nervously shipped the suitcases by bus across the country to Kigoma, Tanzania. All but one of my suitcases caught up to me three days later. As I checked them over, I was relieved to see that I had the Milltown items (the final bag was finally delivered to me two weeks later, the day I was to sail for Kalemie, DRC!).

The next leg of the journey was on a cargo boat across Lake Tanganyika, the second deepest lake in the world! It took nearly 12 hours for the heavy boat to battle wind and waves from Kigoma to Kalemie. I thought of Jesus and John Wesley finding calm on stormy seas and held on to the faith that the cross would soon be landing in Tanganyika Conference.

Kalemie is the largest city in the Tanganyika Conference and encompasses two of the thirteen districts. I visited several churches in Kalemie, including St. John’s UMC of the Kabimba district. In talking with the Kabimba D.S. that day, I thought she said that the new church was 16 km away. I later found out it was 60 km away, on a difficult, mountainous road.

My host, Banze and Pastor Eric Kalumba, Director of Development for the Tanganyika Conference, planned to accompany me to Kabimba. On Tuesday right before Christmas we met to leave at 6 am. When Banze called to let them know we were on our way, they warned us that the road was too difficult even for the Land Cruiser. It looked like it would be a sunny day, so we decided to go on motorcycles. I could ride behind Banze, and we hired a second driver to transport Pastor Eric and transport my heavy Milltown bag. We headed out of town at 7:30 am after getting fuel and a few tune-ups on the motorcycles. It was indeed a terrible, hard, long road over a mountain.

A new road is in the works between Kalemie and Kabimba. Currently, though, it runs out of pavement before leaving Kalemie. For several kilometers past Kalemie, the fairly wide, graded, sandy road goes just past a brand new football (soccer) stadium. It runs between beautiful luscious green fields of well-irrigated rice, cassava, and corn with the help of NGOs. After about 30-40 minutes, the road starts climbing steeply up a mountain. The high mountainous road narrows into alternately sandy or rocky paths, winding high above an island-speckled bay for 7 kilometers. Occasionally mountain streams tumble across, leaving slick deep mud and puddles.

Just when I thought I couldn’t stay astride any longer, we came around a bend where we were met by a crowd of United Methodists ready to welcome to us. We had arrived at the outskirts of Kabimba after almost three hours of grueling travel. I struggled to dismount the motorcycle as gracefully as I could with very stiff, cramped, shaky legs and sore back. But overall, I was grinning and incredibly elated to see these brothers and sisters in Christ! Many children crowded around me, grinning joyfully from ear to ear and I shared fist pumps with them. I even managed to clap and dance as we processed with singing through town to the church.

The current sanctuary and parsonage teeter on a steep, rocky hill overlooking the city. The path up was very treacherous, especially with my shaky legs. When I stumbled, everyone tried to help me, making it even harder. I cannot imagine how people reach church or leave when it is raining and wet. Worship services can last around three hours here, in which time a bright, clear morning can turn quite rainy.

We entered their current building and worshiped together until noon. Multiple choirs of children, youth, men, and women sang beautiful songs. Finally, the D.S. stood to tell the story of me coming to be missionary in their conference. Then I told them about Milltown UMC in Indiana. I was not sure how much they knew of the story. I told about Milltown’s long history, its final worship service, its desire to live on by helping use funds from the sale of their building to build another church in DRC, and the member who transferred her membership to the new church. I told about your congregation finally taking down the cross and the paraments to send to the Congo. I pulled out the well-travelled bag from my backpack. The congregation gasped and ululated with joy as I pulled out the shiny cross. Many surged forward to get a closer look as I handed it to the pastor. Then, one by one, I pulled out the paraments. I wasn’t sure how much they observe the colors and symbols of the church season, but with so many young children there, I took the opportunity to explain the significance of each. I started with the white altar cloth embroidered with “Holy, Holy, Holy.” One by one, I pulled out each cloth, the red one with red flames for Pentecost, green with gold symbols of the Trinity, purple with embroidered crown of thorns, and finally the white cloth with the crown of victory for Jesus’s resurrection on Easter. Finally, I flipped over that white cloth to show the other side embroidered with the symbol of the gold manger. I concluded by celebrating how awesome it is that God is with us no matter how many obstacles and delays we have in life, how I wanted to present this cloth to them for Easter, but how thankful I was God helped me get here to present this same altar cloth in time for Christmas.

Then DS invited me up to the parsonage perched above the church. She explained that it was being built while she was at General Conference in 2019, and during those weeks she was gone it was destroyed three times by rains. It is a simple three room house in which they live with the youngest and oldest of their children while the others are in boarding school. I asked about housing for the other pastor, superintendent of the United Methodist schools. She said he and his family live with them in their house. He and his wife have six children.

We made our way carefully down the steep path and walked through town to the new church building. It is on a wide, flat, grassy expanse in front of the United Methodist schools. It is about three or four times larger, twice as tall, bright with many glass windows, a cross shape in the concrete floor, a raised altar area, and two offices in back. Much has been accomplished with the money Milltown UMC gave them. It is not open yet though. There are neat piles of rock and sand inside awaiting the next steps. They have yet to buy tiles for the floor. They want to buy new plastic chairs. They plan to finish the front veranda and put up a bell-tower/steeple. They need an additional $5,000 to finish these.

Beyond completing the church building, I asked what visions they have for the church. The lay leader wants to invest in a boat to help them more easily transport people and goods between Kalemie and Kabimba and raise money for the church. The Kipendano UMW president, Fatuma, said the women want to build a guest house next to it. The youth want to cultivate some of the land and sell sodas to raise money for their ministries. They want to buy new modern musical instruments for a praise band. We concluded with a prayer and another song. Their music billowed high in the rafters and echoed on the tin roof. I look forward to the official opening of this church and the cross and altar cloths coming to their final blessing place! It will be a glorious day.

Before we dismissed, there was one last presentation. They dragged forward a very belligerent, bucking young billy goat, yes, into the new sanctuary. I thought this might be symbolic too, but, no, they actually gave it to me and expected me to take him home. Pastor Eric suggested I pay our motorcycle driver extra to carry it back, and he agreed.

The poor, protesting, wriggling, bleating goat was tied around the equally unhappy looking driver’s waist. Four legs, front and back, were bound together. I hoped both the driver and the goat had had a chance to use the bathroom before this moment. Poor Pastor Eric had to sit right behind those unhappy hooves. After our first stop for a muddy stretch, he said he’d been kicked several times. I would not have blamed the driver and Pastor Eric at all if they had decided to set the poor creature free between there and here. Don’t worry. I will not bring it back to you in Milltown, Indiana.

We left again at 1:45 and reached home around 4:45 pm. I had to stop for more stretch breaks on the way back. We were all exhausted, sore, and very relieved to finally get home, including and most especially the goat. Overall, though, I am very happy that we made the journey, and that the cross and cloths are finally in their new home.

\*Friendly Planet Missiology sent Milltown’s funds, and one of FPM’s Congolese board members oversaw the construction of the church. They were making steady progress until Covid-19 shut down churches in DRC.