

March 4, 2007

The School Conundrum

Recently I sent out an email to a number of friends, asking for feedback on one of our most challenging questions this year—where will Phoebe attend school. As Adam said this morning, “It’s quite a can of worms you’ve opened with this one.” The responses have been full of wisdom and love, but everywhere on the spectrum. Below you’ll find the original message plus some quotes from responses. I suspect we’ll continue grappling with this for years, so it’s never too late to respond.

Dear friends,

We believe there’s a reason God made us a church, as a whole bunch of people who read scriptures and try to figure out what they mean for our lives, and sometimes we just need to ask for help from each other to figure this stuff out.

So I’ve got a question I would love to hear thoughts on from any of you, whether you have kids of any age or aren’t even married. I woke up in the middle of the night pondering this one, and it brought me to tears to wrestle with the injustice of it.

The issue is this. Phoebe will be 4 ½ next January, at the beginning of the next school year here, and it’s the age when most kids here would start a sort of kindergarten (in fact plenty of them start when they’re 3 ½, so we already get people asking why she’s not in school.) There would be a lot of reasons to start her in school then—she could use some time interacting with kids her age, and she’s more than ready to listen to a teacher (she plays school a lot and she’s already learned to count to fifty and knows the sounds of most letters). But WHERE?

Our land lord happens to be the principal of the primary school in town (Winterton), which is where all the white kids go (and some Zulu kids who are nearby and have money—some of them stay there, too). He’s a great Christian guy—we’ll likely even join a Bible study with him. And he works hard to make the school as good and as diverse as possible. But the fact is, if we were black and lived where we live, there’s no way we could go there. White schools and black schools are all technically free and open to anyone, but white schools choose to add pretty steep school fees to hire extra teachers, get sports teams, and other bonuses. And they’re spread far enough apart that if you don’t have a car, you’re stuck.

So I checked out the school that’s actually closest to us. It’s called Glen Isla, and is actually within walking distance, up the driveway of a dairy farm run by our Christian neighbors. It was started generations ago by their family to educate the poor black people working on their farm, but now is a public school for kids who walk over forty five minutes each way to get there. I walked past the gate and my jaw literally dropped. Aside from schools in Nicaragua that didn’t receive any public school money at all and

don't have walls, I have NEVER seen such a run-down looking little school, and I've seen some pretty bad ones. Maybe it's worse because in the wet season weeds have grown up as tall as me all around the walls, but there was a broken pane in nearly every set of windows, and the doors just hung open on broken hinges. I couldn't see inside, but you can guess there weren't any pretty posters on those walls.

It brings tears to my eyes just thinking about it. That's the school that, in my mind, it would make all the sense in the world to send my kids to. But to white people here, it's a no-brainer that you'd never ever send your kid there.

Now I've talked to our principal friend a bit and heard that the problems are deep. He claims that principals at black schools are just too lazy to request funding from the government to cover extra programs or teachers. I suspect they get "lazy" from feeling a bit beaten down. From what I've heard, waiting for the government to process requests for desks and stuff sounds pretty discouraging.

So the other night it just hit me hard. I can't feel right about sending my daughter off to the white school just because we're white and have a car (and in fact we have white friends to car pool with, so we don't even have to drive all the time) and can spring for the school fees, while black neighbors trudge over to Glen Isla primary school and are lucky to have desks with seats. UGGG. But sending our kids to the black school isn't necessarily changing anything, and what with hearing Zulu most of the time and being the only white kids, it wouldn't be a great place to try to learn every day anyway.

So this is where I need your help in coming up with some creative What-would-Jesus-do ideas. First thing I'm thinking about doing is working up the courage to go talk to the principal at Glen Isla and ask honestly is there something we could do to help his school. So I'd ask for prayers for that. But beyond that, I'm just pondering. What if we took Phoebe to Glen Isla one or two days a week, and the other days did home-school or went to the Winterton school? It would certainly start a lot of conversations with our white neighbors. But I don't want years down the road to hear Phoebe complain that we "sent her to some lousy school just to make a statement." But on the other hand, I think it could be a really beautiful thing for her to hang out with Zulu neighbors, learn the language, and see the world from another side. Right now the kids do one half-day a week with our old Zulu housekeeper who runs a day-care, and they seem to do great with the Zulu kids, even though Phoebe and Zeke don't speak much Zulu. It would mean we'd seriously invest in the school, too, getting to know teachers and really caring if there was a pencil shortage or whatever.

But there's a lot of variations this could take. Maybe we'll just find the principal doesn't want us at Glen Isla. Maybe we'll find we could do the most good by helping from the sidelines with some service or supply. Maybe we'll end up just going to Winterton (it's not like it's a malicious school—they work hard to make it a good place, and how are they supposed to improve a school like Glen Isla when they're struggling to pay their own teachers?) Maybe we'll home-school (Phoebe's super easy to teach, and Zeke and we don't mind her company!) and find play groups.

So we've got a year to think and pray on this one. But please, write back with any ideas or prayers. We're stuck.

Chrissy and Adam

Some Responses to the School Conundrum

"I am moved by your struggle. For so many people, myself included the idea of safety trumps all other concerns and parents nearly universally seem to give themselves permission to be selfish when it comes to their own children. At some level this seems right but your struggle here strikes me as truly loving thoughts."

"God made you both academicians and missionaries to not only minister to the the marginalized, but also to equip and nurture your children **ACADEMICALLY**, too. Hence, to me Adam and Chrissy Jesky, it's a no brainer: Home school those little darlings and try not to let diversity nor ethnic guidelines dictate your resolve in this matter. These are your children - you have one chance to shape and frame their little minds."

"Would Phoebe and Zeke be comfortable at Glen Isla? My guess is that they would, even if the schoolhouse is run-down. Unlike you, Phoebe and Zeke have little basis for comparison. After all, they've never been to school. Second, would they get-on well with their peers? Would they be accepted? Again, I'm sure they would. Young kids seem generally interested in one another and probably don't carry the baggage adults do."

"Don't fight your battles with your child's education. You owe it to your child to give them the best possible education, especially in the early developmental years. The reason you're even in this position is because your parents did the same for you. You're in Africa able to make a difference in large part because of the quality education your received."

"Don't use you're child's education as the tool for doing something because she doesn't have a choice in the matter. Find some other way to confront this issue... If Phoebe ends up with a poor education or some type of learning disability, I don't think it will be much comfort to say, 'Well, at least we proved our point.'"

From someone who wrestled through segregation issues in the South with their now-adult children: "We rejected home schooling from the beginning. We felt that this was not only the most selfish and privileged course of all, but that we would also start down the road toward isolating our kids from those like-em-or-not very real problems and challenges that they would need inevitably to deal with if they were not to spend their lives as hot-house plants with diminished "immune systems"... The alternatives were hard work... I was a constant visitor to the local newspaper offices, the local radio and TV stations... Did our kids suffer as a result? Yeah, undoubtedly at times - but I think they grew up with a better education, an education in things that really count, than they would ever have gotten otherwise."

“In my way of thinking children should not be pushed to interact every day with a bunch of peers until later (5-6). The main reason is that children at an earlier age need to develop their identity with adults before dealing with peers. This helps them better develop their identity.”

“I think a good talk with the principal of the poor school will help you understand and educational philosophy he has and not worry so much about the poverty of the material things as much as the poverty of ideas. We have grown up with the wrong idea that poor is bad and so throw money at situations where there are bad ideas. All the material things in the world will never make that school a good school. A lot of people in nineteenth century were educated very well with a few books, at tables with 4 at a table, writing on slates. In fact some of the schools were very poor condition, but with love and consistent educational discipline they did really well.”

“This is just the very beginning of their "education." I started school in a teeny, tiny... town. It lacked many things, but I didn't know that at the time. I remember my friends and the experiences we had. I'll admit that I attended some great schools later in life, but never have I wished for a different [elementary school] experience.”

“Phoebe has and is working so much in cross-cultural situations that I don't see a huge need for pushing more for the sake spending less time with white people and becoming more culturally trained. Phoebe is already not quite "American", and I don't know how much more should be put on her plate before returning to a western context... If your purpose for sending P to a non-white school is to make a cultural and reconciliatory statement, I'm not so sure that that would be best accomplished through your children... Just remember, YOU are the missionaries, not your kids.”

From a South African living in Germany... “You might send them to the poor school for preschool and then send them to formal school at the white school at age 6.”

“We are home schooling... and believe very much that God has led us into it. We were not the home school kind of people, but... there is a wonderful bond the boys have with [their mom] that they would never have if we sent them to public school... Does it really make sense that putting little kids together - 20-30 in a classroom will create well-adjusted kids and some day teenagers?... It probably sounds like I'm giving a sermon on home schooling, but I do believe that God leads each family in different directions.”

“No matter where you live, you would be facing this dilemma, it just seems bigger b/c the marginalization of the income classes and thus private vs. public schools is greater in your current situation. So my advice is this... remove yourself from your current situation and decide what your educational priorities are for your children. (Academic challenge, moral reinforcement, exposure to diversity, safety, etc.)”

March 3, 2007
The Loans Have Begun

I hear thunder! That doesn't mean it's going to rain, but we can hope. It has been nearly a month with only one rainfall, which for this season means a serious drought. Farmers without irrigation are losing entire corn harvests.

In the realm of our sowing of seeds in our Microfinance Work, though, some little saplings are sprouting. Yesterday we gave out our first loans of the year to a group of three youth and their business mentors. It's a total of only about \$150 (980 rand), but I'm still in a bit of shock. I held my head and told Adam today, "I can't believe we just passed out a thousand rand! They better pay it back!" Tomorrow I'll meet with another group and should approve them to receive a loan by next week. Adam is in the third day of training 14 young people at the high school where he works, and the training has gone remarkably well.

So by the end of next week we should have about 20 young people with small businesses. We have people selling chicken, chips, eggs, sausages, cold drinks, and even underwear (that's a first!) It's only the beginning, since our goal for the year is 100 or more loans. I had better get used to this waiting and trusting.

I have also been invited to investigate opening YEBO groups in another village. I'm daunted by the prospect of training staff and opening clubs in another area, but I'm also intrigued by this little place. Madondo, the man organizing our meetings, is an amazing character. He works for several different village gardening projects, holds church meetings in his home, and tells me "I've been praying for something like this, for young people to think about ways to earn money on their own." He used to run a small business of his own, and has boundless energy.

Last Saturday Madondo organized an initial meeting of youth interested in our project, and thirty one people came—the biggest meeting I've ever seen with our organization. The youth bombarded me with questions for a good two hours!

Then a week later we had another meeting and how many people showed up? Two! I can't believe this place sometimes! Not sure if they decided they weren't interested, or if there was confusion about the meeting time, or what. Oh well. I'll go back for one more meeting and if that's a bust we'll find other places to focus.

It's amazing how people just don't have faith that meetings will happen or self-confidence to try new things. I guess when you've had so many disappointments and so few opportunities, that mentality just settles into a whole community, and it takes a lot of work to overcome it. Sometimes I think if I can do one thing in Africa to make a difference it won't be giving loans or starting businesses or anything related to earning money—it will be giving people an experience they can look back on and say "We succeeded. Others followed through on their promises, and so did I, and it worked."