

Danny Henson - May 2008

Dear friends and family,

Change, aside from being one of the foremost constants of ship's life and the most difficult part for me, seems to be the greatest motivator for creativity and communication. A lot has changed since I last wrote, and so while this may seem early compared to the pace of my last two updates, putting it off would only likely give it a chance to grow to once again in-digestible proportions.

We have spent the last eight days ministering in Vanuatu, a small island nation in the South Pacific just west of Fiji. Originally, efforts had been made to arrange a visit to the capital of Port Villa, but it became clear that this wasn't where God was taking us and the door was opened for a visit to the port of Santo, which is on a smaller island. Santo is the second biggest city in the country, but still extremely small (estimates I heard on the higher end put it around 20,000 people), and there is something of a rivalry between Santo and Villa, so the people of Santo were excited that the Doulos was instead coming to them. This did create a lot of complications and challenges for the team lining up the visit from the land, as they had just a couple of weeks to make all the arrangements for the ministry on shore, programs on board, as well as arranging volunteers and publicity for the visit.

All in all, things really shouldn't have gone as well as they did.

I felt very privileged to see a different side of what happens when we come to a port, through the fresh perspective of my new job. I've been granted the opportunity to spend my last few months on board the Doulos out of the engine room and instead working in the office that plans and coordinates all of the on board programs. All of this was very new to me, because while I've seen and been involved in a lot of programs, I had little understanding of what actually went into making one happen or the amount of planning and preparation that goes into some of them weeks and months ahead of time.

My responsibilities are still (thankfully) limited while I'm learning the job, but I've been able to be involved in the planning and execution of several programs during the visit to Santo. While it has been exciting to see something new of the work the Doulos community does, it is much less simple to me than working in the engine room. This is the first time I have ever had a job that I wasn't doing largely by myself and largely with my hands. In the engine room, when problems arose they were of the technical sort, which could be reasoned out and solved or fixed with tools more often than not, and when we did make mistakes there was always a name on a list to call for help and, best of all, few witnesses and no audience. I have to remind myself that I did ask for this change, and I wanted it because I was afraid of stagnating in the engine room where things had become very easy and routine, and of missing this chance to continue growing with a new challenge to certain recognizable weaknesses in my personality. Simply put, I am really hoping that this job gives me a chance to grow more organized, more creative, and learn to work well and plan well with a team and community of people. I am excited about it though, and as usual, when I get excited or passionate about something in my life, there's a well-spring of creativity and energy.

One of the first programs I got to see put together here in Vanuatu was a "Chief's Gathering". Vanuatu is very much a village culture, and each village is led by a chief, some elected, some hereditary, but all given the final authority within their community. Our line-up team arranged for this program to bring them together and encourage them towards a life and leadership of integrity for their people. Everything seemed very well planned, with good speakers and a good program, the lounge was decorated nicely and a formal steak dinner was planned and prepared. However, when the time came for our guests to arrive and I was sent as the program assistant to let them in from the quayside, there was only a small gathering waiting.

Nearly a hundred chiefs had been invited, but we learned that because of the rain many of them would be unable to travel out of their villages. While it was tempting to be disappointed, the program organizer made the best of it by consolidating our Doulos hosts at each table, filling a smaller number of tables half with hosts and half with guests instead of a couple hosts to each table, and the program went on. From a purely selfish point of view, the best part of this new arrangement was the abundance of leftover cake.

The chiefs who came seemed genuinely touched. This is possibly the only time in many of their lives to be invited to such an event, let alone on a ship, or one as unique as the Doulos, and then to be served and catered to by foreigners and to be spoken too and encouraged as equals by the leaders of our community from their experience and the word of God. At the end of the evening they voiced their appreciation and gathered together in the front of the lounge to sing us two songs, an impromptu blessing that really touched us in return as we saw the effect our efforts and prayers had produced in them. Certainly the high-light of the new job in Vanuatu was the International Cafe. Maybe it sounds strange when I write about "Cafe" programs, I was confused when I first came here because to me that word is something synonymous with restaurants, not performances or programs. On the Doulos, a "cafe" is a program where we set up the main lounge full of round tables surrounded by chairs, each table hosted by a member of the crew, and serve drinks and snacks during a program oriented around a theme that is usually discussed at certain points of the program around the tables.

The International Cafe is pretty common, and we do one in most ports, but I can honestly say (with some legitimate hope that I'm not too biased because of my intimate involvement) that this was one of the best I've ever seen. Usually the idea behind an International Cafe is to showcase the cultural diversity of our community and crew (350 people from 52 different nationalities, blah blah blah :) through cultural performances and dramas, which can be really entertaining, and then tie all of it back into sharing the gospel or glorifying God by giving him the credit for the unity we experience here, being able to live and serve as one family in spite of our monumental differences.

I got to play a part in planning and coordinating this program from the beginning, with my friend Mieke leading the way and teaching me how this all works. I really have to give her the credit for it, because she did the lion's share of the work and the planning, mostly I played ping-pong and sounded ideas off of her, but it helped me so much to see the process from beginning to end. There was a point just before the program was actually due to start where I found myself standing behind a curtain with a printed program in my hand and thinking "All I really have here is a wish list, I have no guarantee any of these folks are going to show up or do any of this." God was faithful though, and the program went

beautifully. We were blessed with a great MC, and very enthusiastic hosts, who together made for a great atmosphere and lively interaction all throughout the program. The biggest problem in the end was trying to get people to leave so we could pack down the lounge.

While it was an extremely busy port for me, I finally got the chance to go out and actually see a little bit of Vanuatu on our last day in the country. Before Tuesday morning, I had barely stepped outside the gate of the port, and now on our last day it was almost a race to see something before our 2:00 PM shore leave expired and the ship sailed away. Several friends and I piled into a pick-up truck and drove out to a natural phenomenon called a "Blue Hole" out in the jungle. It's a natural spring that comes up into a lagoon, and for some reason (okay, I was in too much of a rush to be curious rather than happily awestruck) the pool is a dark crystal clear blue.

The water is coooool, which has been extremely uncommon in the last twenty months and made me a little homesick, but it was beautiful and the pool itself was overshadowed by massive jungle trees that we could climb and jump out of. My friend Walker even rigged up a hook on a pole and we entertained ourselves for hours pulling vines to the high branches and then using them to swing out over the pool and drop in. We had an amazing time, which was totally a blessing and a treat from God, and I think it will certainly be one of my high-lights looking back on the time I spent here on the Doulos.

Please be in prayer for us as we are now sailing to Fiji, where things will be very different from the last few months we've spent between PNG and Vanuatu. There are a lot of new opportunities for us in this more culturally diverse country, and a lot of people are very excited for it. Yaknow, aside from it being Fiji and all, which makes me pretty excited already, especially considering we will be spending our yearly Sabbath Week there between ministry in the two ports of Lautoka and Suva.

Also pray for me, there may be a lot of rugby in this country and they are very serious about their rugby. I still can't pretend I'm any good at this game, and I don't want to spend my Sabbath week with a plaster cast.

Please pray that I can adjust well to my new job, and find productive outlets for all this creativity and energy that I am experiencing without encouraging any of these workaholic tendencies I could avoid in doing jobs that didn't really motivate me aside from serving God through the sacrifice. Apparently a ministry that excites me is just as dangerous as one I struggle with, and I need to learn to plan my time well or I will go blind from my laptop.

I also have a lot of various decisions I'm struggling to make lately, about my immediate future and plans both here and at home, so there's a lot of fasting and praying going on, so please be praying for me that I would be sensitive to God's leading and faithful to whatever he leads me to or shows me. I know that is all kinda vague; if you need/want more specifics to pray or just feel like you understand, don't be afraid to ask.

Thanks so much for your prayers, and for all that so many of you have done to make this time in my life possible. I feel like my growth in character and relationship with God is even accelerating the closer I get to the end of my commitment, which is the opposite of what I feared would happen. It was easy to imagine I would burn out or get tired of all this, but God has been so faithful lately and even inspired me through some of the things my friends are doing to grow and really commit myself to earnestly seeking God and making daily efforts to do that and seek discipleship and teaching. It's a really great time for me here. Oh, and I finally got the last of those needles out of my hands, and I promise I will throw that story in one of these updates soon, once the post-traumatic stress disorder clears up ;)

That said, I am a bit homesick, and if you're on this list there's a good chance I miss you personally very much, and I am fighting the urge to count the days till I step off a plane onto Californian... well, probably not soil, but pavement at least. Anyway. I miss you folks, and you're in my heart and prayers.

Much love,
Danny