

INTERNATIONAL SERVAS GENERAL ASSEMBLY (Attendance Report)

By Deborah SIKOYA: 10th – 16th October 2015, Totara Springs, New Zealand.

PRE-CONFERENCE PREPARATION:

I was very reticent to go to New Zealand as I knew it would cost me a considerable amount of money (which i don't really have and may drag me into debt which stresses me out a lot.) Even though Demelza had applied and managed to get funding for the travel and the conference and even the visa costs – the outstanding amount is still in Malawi money a great deal. As i earn a just sustainable amount of money and have no savings I had to borrow money from Demelza. I kept saying 'I can't go, I can't do this'. But Demelza urged me to grab this opportunity saying – life is about sacrifices and nothing comes without a bit of hard work. So I will have to work hard to be honourable and pay her back her money on my return.

Applying for the visa was a big thing and it took a lot of work getting testimonials from my catering clients and begging my bank for bank statement they wanted to charge me \$15 to print out for me! Eventually with Demelza coming to my house to have dinner and leaving at 1230pm!! we managed (she virtually forced me) to send off the visa application to South Africa and then we got the reply in good time after 2 weeks –I got it! Demelza approached Gift of the Givers who donated via Rab Processors teabags and small packs of biscuits for 150people, Jenny donated soap/massage cream from her company Amaravi and cards and juice-purses handmade by 10year old Sichella Benbow.

TRAVEL & ARRIVAL TO CONFERENCE ✈:

Then we went to try to book flights but the ones we had saved were gone and they were super expensive from Malawi. Anne Greenhough from the UK was fantastic and helped us book flights over the internet even using her own money to pay!! Thank you Anne so very much!

Mean while Demelza was talking by the internet with Servas New Zealand and trying to organise me a SYLE-volunteer placement so i could have the opportunity of staying longer in New Zealand. It's was the first time I had ever travelled out of Malawi or been on a plane or even been to a first world country. I was very scared. I left my country on a Tuesday and didn't arrive in NZ until Thursday because of how far i had to fly and due to the time differences. I was VERY TIRED!! I was met at the airport by a NZ Servas host waiting for his incoming traveller. He told me to 'go catch the cheap bus into Auckland' – I got on a shuttle bus, but when it arrived it turned out it was a hotel transfer bus. I thought the price was very expensive and later learnt I had misunderstood what I'd been told and NOT taken the cheaper local bus.



“Presentation”



“Deliberating over how to vote.”

ACCOMMODATION 🛏: The centre was a school camp, surrounded by farm land. My room was a cabin I shared with 3 others, from Sweden, Australia x2. Bunk beds with sleeping bags. For me it was cold but we an extra blanket each. Showers were like at boarding school, away from the room in another block. I as happy it reminded me of my old secondary school days.

FOOD 🍴: The menu seemed quite English to me (from my catering training eye), it was ok for me. Breakfast: 7-8am; Lunch: 12-1330pm; Dinner: 7-830pm. Tea + coffee at break@10am+3pm. I liked the New Zealand vegetable which looks like spinach but isn't. LOTS of apples!

CONFERENCE: This was my first conference I was really happy about the atmosphere and the set-up. People were very friendly from the outset and when I arrived I was so relieved to meet Ann and Marijke+Chris - they welcomed me so warmly. It was the same with the people at the conference – I didn't feel a stranger as everyone greeted me – I had been really worried about that! I felt relaxed, not awkward, i wasn't scared to ask questions or ask for advice/help. Thanks Marijke, I asked you a LOT of questions! The New Zealand team – were VERY organised I was impressed with them. They had tried to think of every problem before it happened – excellent forward planning/team work.

I had my own table at the conference – they had put new people next to old comers –good idea. I listened to the motions, at first i struggled to follow but very soon I grasped what was going on the main issue for discussion. I voted confidently – holding my paddle high and in group workshops I spoke up but not during voting discussions. I liked the SWG (subject working groups), which deliberated the motions. I choose IT & Future and we talked about the world registering of Servas International, making Spanish and English the working languages of Servas International, getting the Servas Archives in order – digitising/ordering it.

We had a presentation about The United Nations by Danielle from France. She felt that as a peace organisation' we don't promote 'peace' ideas enough. We should have peace quotes in our Newsletter (she mentioned calendar?) and even at Country levels - we should all be pushing peace phrases. Other Servas UN Geneva attending participants felt that the Servas President should make every effort to attend UN conferences when he could.

Voting for new positions was a serious affair! Seats were hot! and like the motions we had to discuss and vote upon there was a lot to think of – who is right - who will do best and work well in a close hard working demanding volunteer position. The results were in the Daily Newsletters that went out by email from the conference made by Pablo from Argentina - nice guy! There was another Peace Talk by Danielle, she urged increased communication, solidarity, disaster responses and visit to refugee camps so you see with your own eyes the serious desperate need for peace in our world. You will be stimulated to act and proud to be in Servas. Becoming International members are, Rwanda, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Bangladesh and loosing international status and becoming National-only are Kenya, Sri Lanka , Bolivia and Uzbekistan.

Starting sessions at 0830-12ish, coffee@, Afternoon sessions were 1330 - 5ish. Evenings: 830-11pm-ish 'Country Presentations' by power point/DVD's. I gave decided to focus on our SYLE programme and one of our partner organisations – Gift of the Givers – I thought it would be something different to everyone else's presentations and keep us awake! I showed out SYLE DVD and Marie Cristina Valentina stood up and

waved at everyone as she was in the film and came to Malawi for 2 weeks back in 2013, helping us to collect blood stories. I prepared a table with tourism info, The EYE, biscuits and tea bags and our laminated photo montages. I put on every delegates table a hostlist, an EYE magazine between 2 (leaving them to fight over who got it), and AYISE leaflets.

AFRICAN MEETING: Day 5 African delegates got together over lunch to talk about the next African area meeting as well as African development strategies – it was agreed to delay until 2017 the regional get together – so that funding sources have been built up/are available.



“African participants ”



“Voting – Malawi paddle in hand.”

EXCURSION: Buses were hired for us on Tuesday, we went to Hauka Falls, Volcanic Fields and touched the Pacific ocean. Good to have a day away from papers, talk to people and laugh.

DELEGATES ATTENDING:

X56 voting delegates. X200 participants. WOW!

You come thinking the world is big and leave thinking is small.

PERSONAL VIEWS / EXPERIENCES

BAD DIFFICULT/CHALLENGING

- ⊗ Obtaining a visa for New Zealand was hard work – they needed papers difficult to get in Malawi and the cost really put me off.4
- ⊗ I'd never flown before and the routing was long with many changes – it would be challenging for a seasoned traveller but a 1st timer!
- ⊗ I was very anxious flying into NZ as I had biscuits with me for the delegates and was worried they would be confiscated.
- ⊗ Also I took x25 The Eye Magazines – they were heavy to lug around when I first arrived.
- ☹ Messing up with the bus to Parnell Hotel from the airport, got me down.
- ☹ I wasn't happy with the meet+ greet at the airport – I think we didn't think it through (myself & Demelza) when planning – we mis-understood thinking a NZ person would be there. *I know now how arriving visitors to Malawi must feel and how important the arrival is for impressions.*



“Cultural presentations in the evening.”



“Malawi Presentation Table.”

GOOD, REWARDING, FULFILLING

- ☺ The 1st few days I was part of the newsletter crew – collecting minutes, but then we put photos and quotes and the most important information down thereafter. There were after 3 others in the team. Pablo was the editor-in-charge. It seemed to work well. *I gave my best.*
- ☺ My arrival greetings at Parnell was very warm and open – I was SO RELIEVED. Thank you Dianne Patterson, Ludiviko from Mexico and a NZ member and Ann from the UK who does Dolphin work – it was great to get a shower in – 1st in 48 hours of travel!!!!!!
- ☺ The unexpected but v. helpful hosting with a NZ couple on my 2nd night so I could get to the departing bus easily. – thanks to Marijke+Chris
- ☺ I liked the camera drone that flew into the air to take a group photo of us – it was amazing – I'd never seen one before – made me laugh!
- ☺ I liked the food, the people, the venue, the programme and the day out trip – although I-o-n-g. ☺ Video interview – fun – I talked easily!!
- ☺ I personally really enjoyed the group work in the workshops – I liked the free atmosphere and felt very comfortable to speak out.
- ☺ The opening and closing remarks from the Maori people. Yes that means Malawians reading this THERE are BLACK people in New Zealand but to me they are like coloured. It was great to meet them and hear of their rich culture.
- ☺ I was impressed with the openness and lack of pompousness of the EXCO committee. Very down-to-earth and approachable. Thanks!
- ☺ The conference organiser made it look so smooth and easy – but I know it must have all been super hard work. *Well done NZ committee!*

SUMMARY: I was frightened to go to this meeting. So many FIRSTS, for me. 1st using my passport, 1st getting on plane, 1st arriving in Ethiopia, not missing my connection in Ethiopia, 1st arrival in Malaysia, 1st eating of plane food, 1st exchanging of money and 1st meeting such really great people in Servas that have REALLY warmed my heart and surprised me with how happy it all made me. It would NOT have been possible without Demelza energy and determination to push me to go (harassing me into sending off the visa and PUSHING- hard!), believing in me. Without Anne we just wouldn't have got the tickets and I would have had a lot more to pay back – clever thinking on your feet Anne and caring. New Zealand – Jessica for visa help and NZ for being such WONDERFUL organising hosts – great event! ***A privilege to have attended!***