

“Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

ESTHER 4:14B

Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?



DONALD AND
MARYJANE WESTRA

Everyone jokes about African time, but I think the North American concept of time is a big joke. Have you ever noticed how often you hear the word ‘busy’ in a day? Being busy in North American culture is highly valued. By contrast, African culture does not value being busy. If you ask someone if they are busy, they look at you strangely. Don’t even try to ask someone what time it is. They don’t have watches. This culture values spending time with friends and family, and helping each other.

In North American culture, I may have had six or seven meetings a day. A typical day in Africa consists of ‘footing’ to my office and waiting until someone walks in and wants to talk to me. Sometimes there is a meeting scheduled although it’s rare to have an appointment. No one has a watch, let alone a phone to call ahead. A meeting scheduled for nine, generally starts at 9:30 but sometimes it gets underway at ten or even eleven. This culture values discussion and consensus building. Decision making by consensus takes time, so there is no predicting when a meeting will end. The more people that attend, the longer the meeting.

Waiting, such as waiting in line or a “queue” is something we in North America abhor. But it is expected in Africa. Why hurry? We in North America never loiter, dawdle or linger around. We are busy. In my former life I was so busy I had to schedule a phone call with my friends. There were never enough hours in a day. When my children were young I often missed their sporting events or dance recitals because I was busy. But here, loitering is a way to chat and connect with friends and family. (And everyone is family.) In Africa, I loiter. I meet a lot of people that way. I learn about their life, their families, and their values. Maybe we in North America have it all wrong. Maybe the joke is on us. Maybe we should loiter more often.

Donald and Maryjane Westra are missionaries with the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe. Donald serves as staff to the Micro-Enterprise and Strategic Planning/Management Program at Mt. Selinda. Maryjane serves as a health and child care consultant at Mt. Selinda

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