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The 16 new
Wayland
Baptist
University
graduates from
Kenya pose
with their
professors and
Wayland
representatives
Vaughn Ross
and David
Howle after
commencement
ceremonies
July 19 on the
campus of
Kenya Baptist
Theological
College.

Wayland touches Africa through Kenya program

By Teresa Young

Wayland Baptist University

NAIROBI, Kenya-Simon Mwangi is not a typical Wayland Baptist University graduate.

He's not 22 years old, armed with a new diploma and out to conquer the world in a new career. He's not spent the last four years calling a small dorm room home, dropping into bed after midnight or attending sporting events with his classmates.

And unlike his counterparts nearly half the globe away, Mwangi is not sitting through his graduation ceremony wishing it were over, ready to take off the cumbersome gown and awkward mortarboard cap.

Instead, Mwangi, associate pastor of Parklands Baptist Church in Nairobi with a membership nearing 1,000, is giving the student address at the first commencement ceremony held by Wayland in Kenya, and he's speaking with deep gratitude.

"Simon spoke about the broader knowledge he has now with his Wayland degree and how those classes were like gifts from the faculty," explained Vaughn Ross, professor of biological sciences and program director for the Wayland partnership with Kenya Baptist Theological College. "He spoke of the gift of science, the gift of history and the gift of languages-gifts because of what he can now do with them."



A church choir of Maasai from the town of Kajiado traveled 100 miles by bus to perform at the graduation ceremony, dressed in traditional tribal attire.

Unlike many new college graduates, Mwangi and the other 15 members of the Kenya class of 2003 know their new associate of applied science degrees don't represent an end but a continuation of training for ministries to their church families.

It was that big-picture thinking that had Ross entranced during the commencement ceremony this summer. Admittedly, his mind was in other places, thinking back to when Wayland's involvement in Kenya was in its infancy stages just four years ago. Then, the dream of making education accessible to the people of Kenya—with whom he had worked as a missionary for 19 years—was just in the planning stages.

“Two things kept running through my mind,” Ross said. “First was a personal dream to see Wayland—the school I love—involved in participation missions, then combining that with the dream the Kenyans have to meet their greatest challenge, which is Christian leadership training. Just getting to be part of that dream was great.”

Ross' next thoughts, however, were even more mind-boggling, he said.

“Thinking that these are just small parts of God's bigger dream of winning the world for Christ gave me an overwhelming sense that we were helping the churches to write Christian history in Kenya,” he said.

That big picture is what makes the newest Kenya graduates most excited. Take Isaac Esilima, for example.

An older student and a pastor, Esilima has been a public schoolteacher for

many years and is nearing retirement from that profession. He still is excited about earning the diploma that Ross says is an opportunity “he never would have dreamed of.” This gentle pastor proclaims that it will equip him to serve his congregation better. He leads a new church in Nyahururu.

For many of Esilima's classmates, the diploma they now have is not a promise of great riches but an open door to better serve Christ through their churches. They also in some cases will be able to advance their vocations—many of which involve teaching—and expand their territory to spread the gospel.

David Howle, director of Wayland's Virtual Campus, gave the commencement address, and Ross conferred the degrees with help from Anne Foster, program registrar at Kenya Baptist Theological College, and Bernard Kabaru, the college's principal. Along with their degrees in theology from Wayland, students earned advanced diplomas from the college.

A tradition from the college's ceremonies was carried into the Wayland ceremony as well—presenting a symbol of servanthood.

“Each student received a charge to servant ministries at their churches, and they each received a towel as a symbol of being a servant,” Ross explained, adding that the towels had been embroidered with the Swahili word “mtumishi,” meaning “servant,” and their initials, courtesy of Don Smith's Sunday School class at First Baptist Church in Plainview.

Other Wayland faculty who have taught in the program sent gifts for the graduates as well, including devotional books and jackets with the Wayland logo.

Ross noted that about one-third of the graduating class are members of the Giriama, a people group that were first ministered to about 30 years ago by

missionaries Clay and Pat Coursey, Wayland graduates now retired in the United States.

During the visit to Kenya, Howle spent much of his time setting up an electronic database for the college's library and working on connections that may soon make a satellite link to Wayland's home campus possible.

Ross spent time planning with college leaders.

“We came to a point of looking back and looking forward, and two things really emerged,” Ross said. “First was the success of the students, about their transformations in critical-thinking skills for ministry, plus English language skills and writing.

“We also reaffirmed our original concept, which was to train those with few other opportunities and to retain those who would have opportunities but can get their education here rather than go abroad.

“In this graduation exercise, the number of Baptists in leadership with a college degree increased by approximately 50 percent. I can remember when there were very few Maasai believers in Kenya, and now there are 3,600 Baptist churches representing multiple tribal groups. These Baptist leaders were trained in Kenya and will remain there. Baptist churches in Kenya just can't afford to lose those Christian leaders.”

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