

Dear Father,

Thank you for letting me go to the meri bung in Mendi. It was really amazing! Most of all Lord, I pray that your Church will grow because of what has taken place there this week. Please help me to remember this adventure and may your Name be glorified.

Amen

September 25-30, 2011 was the 10th biannual National Nazarene Meri Bung (Ladies Gathering) in Mendi, Southern Highlands which is about 4 ½ hours from our home at Melanesia Nazarene Bible College. I was able to participate Sept. 25-27 during the first part of this Meri Bung week and I wanted to share the story with you.

There were 1,300 ladies registered the week before the conference, and I knew many more that were going that had not registered yet and paid their K50 including my friend Kathy and me. Kathy Radcliffe has served with her surgeon husband Jim Radcliffe in PNG 26 years. I have been blessed to have her as my prayer partner because she understands God's heart for the lost and is super encouraging! Kathy was bringing her friends Meti and Kelan. They are wonderful Christian hausmeri's (ladies who help in the house) who work in Kudjip. She also brought Noli from Kudjip maintenance. On the way to MNBC, she picked up Susana who is my friend and helps me with housework and sometimes watches Grace and Anna. They brought over a Land Cruiser from Kudjip for Dave to use to take Grace and Anna to school while I was away. John Kerkir, who is our MNBC Church pastor and community liaison, drove our Land Cruiser to the gathering in Mendi. Dr. Neville Bartle also came with us. Dr. Bartle is a retired missionary who served in PNG for 28 years. He had just come back to MNBC for 2 weeks to teach a Master's Class. Dr. Bartle is currently serving as DS of New Zealand. It was great for him to come because his wife Joyce had organized some of the first ladies gatherings when the numbers were very small. It was also exciting to hear his stories of serving and traveling in PNG and about God's protection and presence.

Mendi is in the Southern Highlands of PNG, about 4 ½ hours from MNBC and much of the road is like a bad kiddie roller coaster that jerks your body and neck nonstop. But the scenery was amazing with jungles and mountains and waterfalls and beautiful gardens in the valleys and on the steep hillsides. The grass houses with smoke sifting through the roofs and the clouds covering the mountains are really amazing. We had to go over many mountains to get to Mendi town, so often we went up through the clouds and above them then back down into the next valley. What was incredible about the trip was that all of the ladies going to the trip had decided to make a huge caravan of cars and travel together. Cars filled with ladies from all over PNG had gathered near MNBC to travel together. So the snake traveling the crazy road was about 50 vehicles long, many with flags from their Province and all with their lights on to show we were all together. The Coaster buses seat about 25 and the PMV (Public Motor Vehicle) vans seat about 15, we also had 2 or 3 police escorts with us. Our car stopped on a big hill to get a picture of all the parade of vehicles going by, and we waved and they all honked at us. It was great fun! Everyone had sacrificed money and time to make this happen. They had prayed for God's presence for this gathering that their leaders had been planning for the last 2 years. There was a great sense of excitement and camaraderie as we traveled together.

If you can find a map of Papua New Guinea, you can see what areas I am talking about. Some of the ladies from Bougainville Island had spent K2000 each (\$900) to come to this event and traveled on 3 different boats to get to the mainland. Many ladies had walked 3 days from the Jimi Valley and from the Bromley district to get to a road so they could get a PMV and join the group. On Manus Island the Nazarene Church is only 3 months old, and they sent 7 ladies to join this group. Other ladies came from the new church plant located along the border of West Papua, Indonesia. From that location the ladies had to walk 3 days north then catch a ship (that I think is 2 days) to get to Madang where they could then drive 15 hours to Mendi. The momentum of the Holy Spirit and enthusiasm of the ladies just getting to the conference was palpable.

When we finally arrived in Mendi, we saw a big soccer/rugby field next to the Mendi Nazarene Church with 2 big tents set up as sleeping accommodations. The Grandstand style podium was all decorated and set up with musicians for worship. The plan was for all the ladies to stand or sit out in the field to hear the speakers and worship. They had a group of Southern Highlands ladies in their black, yellow, green, and red Meri blouses and matching bilums (woven bags) playing traditional and homemade kundu drums and singing a welcome song for us.



We all unloaded and hugged all our friends as they arrived and shook hands with hundreds of people. All the Districts have their own Meri Blaus colors. Kathy was in the colors for Western Highlands district which is green and yellow, and I had the colors for MNBC/TC (Bible College and Teacher's College) which was black, blue, and white. There were about 26 in our group. We all wore the outfits for traveling on Sunday, but the main reason for the matching outfits was for the opening service on Monday, which I will tell you all about later!

The whole event was amazing but this was the biggest blessing of the trip. I saw so many students that I knew that had gone out to so many places in Papua New Guinea to do God's work. I saw people I knew from all over that I felt like I had an investment in, and I got to hear about God's amazing work through them and in His Church. I know Heaven is going to be just like that! Kathy said the event is just like Nazarene General Assembly where you walk 10 feet and see somebody you know and hug them and hear all about how God is working in their life. I had students tell me how they are using the Health Class information from last year in their congregations now. I did not get to meet the ladies from Manus Island, but after the conference they stayed with my friend Rev. Lero Kui at her church where she helped disciple these new believers.

They had some worship time and messages of greeting and encouragement on Sunday and then told everybody where they would be sleeping. The Bible College ladies, Kathy and her friends, and I were on the floor of a Four Square Church near the soccer field along with some ladies from Sepik, North Coast, and Western Highlands. All together there were about 110 of us, all sleeping bag to sleeping bag, on the cement floor of the church. Most people had mats so it wasn't too bad. I was surrounded by my friends from the Bible College, and it felt just like camp. Except in camp, they do not start morning worship at 4:30 am while you are still in your pajamas and sleeping bags!! With "lights out" at 11 pm there was not quite enough sleep. Actually they kept the lights on all night and with babies crying and people coughing, etc. sleep was a little bit rough the first night. But by the second night I was so wiped out, I slept very well.

The Bible College ladies near me shared a potluck breakfast on top of our sleeping bags of kaukau (baked sweet potatoes), crackers and peanut butter, carrots, and cucumbers that we had brought with us. The pastor of the Four Square Church took good care of us and sold hot tea and kaukau. I thought mine had coconut milk in it, but my friends said it tasted like soap and I

shouldn't drink it for risk of having my insides cleaned out! We all had a great time laughing and being silly together. But I must say, all my dear friends were very mothering to me: "put your mat here, put your sleeping bag here, why are you covering up when you change your shirt? I'll go with you to the loo, eat this, you can go brush your teeth now, and don't forget your washcloth" etc, etc. I felt very loved with all that (s)mothering!

After our 4:30 am worship, mini-sermon, and breakfast in our sleeping bags, we all went down to the Mendi river to wash. We had to cross over 2 walking bridges that had big sections of the metal missing so we were holding on the rail and easing slowly across the remaining metal bars. There was a mob of ladies down at the river that ran through town. Parts of the river were near a main intersection of the city, so all the people (mostly men) going by in PMV's were gawking as they went by. I just washed my face and feet there because of the lack of privacy and icy water! The other ladies managed to modestly wrap a big cloth around themselves to go into the water and get washed off. I had a group of kids around me probably wondering what on earth some wait meri (white lady) was doing in their town and was she going to fall in the water, so I started sharing about Jesus with them. Then everyone was distracted by a drunk guy trying to cross the broken bridge and a friend of his coming to help carry him across, trying not fall in himself. It was a good opportunity to talk about how the Enemy wants to destroy our lives, but God has an awesome plan of love for each one of them. I didn't do an altar call right there, but I invited them to the church services.

Once we were back at our "house" and all ready in our matching MNBC meri blaus outfits, we went out to the meeting field. All the groups were lined up in their matching outfits for each province and holding banners or flags. Some ladies had matching hats and feathers in their hair or matching bilums. The colors were amazing. We all sang worship songs, then for the preaching we sat down on plastic bags or cardboard to avoid getting wet from the ground. They had Dr. Bartle share for the official opening welcome and unveil the big Nazarene Symbol sign for the 10th PNG National Women's Ministries Conference. Dr. Bartle helped plant the Mendi town church and had led a Work and Witness team to come build the church. He didn't know he would be doing the opening ceremony, but God used him to encourage and inspire and invite everyone to celebrate the mighty things God has done.

Then the big moment arrived! All the ladies lined up in their groups with their flags and banners and made a huge parade around the town. Each group was singing praise songs and we were praying for God's power to fall on Mendi and the Southern Highlands. The largest group was from Western Highlands District and was over 500 ladies. Our group from MNBC of 26 was



probably one of the smallest but we sang loud and held hands as we marched around the town. Everybody in the town lined up along the streets to watch this huge group of ladies. We saw many waving and others with tears pouring down their faces. Later Neville said he estimated there were over 2000 ladies in the march.

Marching and Praying around Mendi Town.

This picture was taken while rounding a corner, looking at the group ahead of me.

These Ladies Gatherings have happened every 2 years for the last 20 years and the March around wherever the event takes place is one of the great highlights of these events. Women in PNG are definitely considered second class, and a majority of them are treated very poorly. It can be a life changing event for these women to be told that they are God's daughters and then for them to participate in something that gives them identity and dignity and honor and fellowship with the loving family of God. I decided that all the effort we put into arranging transportation, the crazy road, the sleeping conditions, the pit toilets, and no running water was all worth it just because of the March. But God had more blessings in store for me.



This picture was taken while rounding a corner, looking at the group behind me.

For the previous 3 months God had been laying on my heart that I needed to share with the ladies at MNBC about how to strengthen marriages. We had seen the marriages of some dear friends break up and heard of other pastors that had lost their ministry licenses because of infidelity. A child who is a friend of ours was molested, and rape is not uncommon here. I wanted to share with ladies how to support their husbands in ministry by meeting their emotional and physical needs, how to pray for protection, and how to guide single ladies to look at a man's Christian character before getting married. The week before this Ladies Conference I had shared this message with about 70 people at the Bible College. But I felt like God was saying I wasn't through. I needed to take my notes with me and be prepared in case I had an opportunity to share again at the Ladies Conference. But the preaching schedule was already set and it didn't seem like an appropriate topic to share in a huge open field where almost the whole town could hear it. At each worship and preaching session, in addition to the over 2000 ladies gathered, there were hundreds of children and men either in the midst or on the outskirts. I later heard that the leaders estimated around 4,000 had gathered in Mendi. It didn't seem like God wanted me to share the message there, so I just waited and prayed.

That evening (Monday) Kathy and I were checking on John Kerkir to find out how our car was doing. He had discovered that one of the tires was flat and had gone to get it patched. I think that was our 8th flat tire since coming to PNG. With previous flats we had gotten the tires patched sometimes and replaced the inner tubes other times, but John said that was the third patch on that tire. Some people described the road to Mendi as a washboard, but I think it was more like a cheese grater. I'm just grateful that we didn't get the flat out in the middle of nowhere on the road. The car and John were doing fine. Then Kathy and I were invited to eat with all the leaders of the conference and District Superintendents. Being a missionary has its advantages, and being the only white people we weren't that hard to find. Kathy and I had been praying for the National leaders a lot during the conference and especially when we started hearing some complaints from groups of ladies about their sleeping accommodations. When 1,300 ladies register and over 2,000 show up, it is hard to get sleeping arrangements for everyone at the last minute! We were glad to get a chance to listen to the leaders and encourage them and pray with them.

Afterward we joined the big group for worship and preaching. The message was on Esther and how, just as she had beauty treatments to prepare her to meet the king, we need to let the Holy

Spirit make our spirits beautiful so we are prepared to meet the King of Kings. I liked it. Esther 2:17 says the king was attracted to Esther and she won his favor and approval. In the Tok Pisin Bible it says, “no gat narapela meri i bin katim lewa bilong king olsem Esta.” Which means, “there was not another lady who cut the liver of the king like Esther.” I thought this was so romantic that I made a card for my sweetie Dave with a picture of a liver on the front that said, “Yu katim lewa bilong me!” (You cut my liver!)

Kathy and I were sitting with some of our MNBC friends a little ways behind the main group since we came late. There was a group of kids back where we were. Many times during the preaching at the conference, we would be listening to the speaker and there would be kids in front of us who were completely turned around just looking at us the whole time. Being white in an all black country, it is not really possible to blend in with the crowd. But this time all the kids were actually paying attention to the message. That is, until the altar call. It is not just a PNG phenomenon that kids get squirrely and disruptive when people have to actually make a commitment to God. Whether it is just kid-nature or a spiritual battle, it's a good time to be proactive and at least pray for people to hear the Holy Spirit. This time, I said to the group of kids, “do you know what she is talking about? She is saying that Jesus wants you to come to Heaven with Him.” We were far enough separated from the main crowd that we didn't disturb the others. I can't remember exactly what I said, and it was all in Tok Pisin, but I think God helped me to give a clear gospel message to the kids. By the time I was done, about 16 kids had gathered around and we prayed together. I have found that it is hard to get a meaningful deep answer from PNG kids when they are in a group; they just tend to giggle and act shy. So I said if any of you asked Jesus into your heart for the first time, you need to tell your pastor or his wife. It's not the best discipleship plan for new Christians, so I prayed that God would bring someone along to water the seeds that were planted. Some of the older kids were already Christians so I asked them to help teach the little ones. I guess I'll see in Heaven how effective that was. I'm glad God is able to do abundantly more than all we ask or imagine.

We got to bed around 11pm after using the lovely pit toilet that belonged to the church where we stayed. It was actually much nicer than other pit toilets I have used because the walls around the hole in the ground were not see-through and the ground was fairly level. Face washing and teeth brushing was from the bottle of filtered water I had brought with me. I didn't see anybody else brush their teeth or wash up before bed, but I didn't feel like I needed to fit in that badly. I also didn't see anybody use sunscreen, but I was sure glad I did, because I still peeled even after using it. I forgot lip sunscreen and ended up with blisters on my lips. Some of my PNG friends said they wished they had used some sunscreen too because their faces were hurting afterwards and were darker than normal.

I slept very well that night because I was wiped out. I can't imagine how the other ladies felt who stayed there the whole week since most were averaging 5 hours of sleep each night with very busy days. Once again the music started at 4:30 am. It was good to worship together. Imagine everyone sitting up in their sleeping bags, many with big thick winter coats on, blurry eyed and froggy voiced, but still worshiping from their hearts. Kathy had suggested that I could share my message on strengthening marriages for morning devotions so when the music leader asked who had something to share, I was ready. So I preached in my pajamas, with my bedhead hair, standing on my sleeping bag to about 110 ladies. I was glad God had encouraged me to read through my notes the day before so I just had to glance at them occasionally. I felt like God gave me the words to say and how to say it. It was a great feeling.

Afterward I offered to answer any questions that the ladies had. In my message I had tried to correct some of the PNG misconceptions about how a woman should not sleep with her husband if she is pregnant or nursing for fear of damaging the baby or her milk. I wasn't surprised that nobody felt comfortable to ask a question before the group so I said people could just come and talk to me one-on-one. I talked to and prayed with about 12 ladies that morning as my friends were getting ready for that morning's preaching. Each lady seemed very appreciative. One lady, who had given up on her dream to come to MNBC, requested an application to come and study to be a pastor. I heard about another lady who said her marriage was almost broken apart but she decided

to give it to God and follow His plan. Many encouraging words came to me afterwards. It was incredibly uplifting.

Then I had to rush to get ready. We had to have all our stuff packed up because we were leaving straight after the morning session. No time to brush teeth, everyone's rushing me, no privacy for changing clothes. I was thinking, "Why am I suddenly so grumpy as I am carrying all my stuff to the car? Maybe because it is 9 am and I still haven't had a chance to go to the bathroom!" I finally got everything into the car, grabbed my new roll of toilet paper, and headed for a pit toilet. I felt like I was almost getting the trick of using these pit toilets, when I suddenly lost my balance and almost fell (that would be really bad). I recovered, but in my instability I dropped my entire roll of toilet paper down into the hole. I was very grateful that my friend Kathy went with me and shared her supply when I called for help. (Sorry if that is "overshare" for my more sensitive readers. Come experience the joys of the mission field and you will realize that sometimes a little dignity is lost on the journey.)

After praying for a fresh dose of the Holy Spirit, I felt ready to be friendly and outgoing again. There were so many people to talk to and greet and "story" with. Just being the white missionary made people want to come and shake my hand. I heard that many ladies were blessed by the fact that Kathy and I slept on the floor rather than in the guest house that we were offered.

There was a lot of heavy rain that week. The soccer field no longer had any grass in the middle because of everyone walking and sitting on it. By Tuesday morning it was just a big field of mud and most people tried to find cardboard or plastic bags to sit on. Kathy and I sat down on a woven mat and quickly were soaked to the skin. We decided standing was a better idea and we turned our skirts toward the sun to try to dry out. After the message, there was a large group of people that went forward at the altar call. The speaker then called all the pastors and leaders to come forward and pray with everyone. Kathy and I went forward to pray with people. I was amazed to see that where everyone was kneeling was not actually mud like the rest of the field but sharp gravel. Once again I was thinking about comfort and lack there of, while God was trying to do something great. I'm glad He is patient with me and can get my attention so I can pray as I am supposed to.



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We had to get on the road soon after the preaching. Because of risk of "rascals" (muggers, car stealers, drunks with bushknives, etc.) we were told by our missionary leaders that our car needed to travel back with another car for protection. Our friend Manus Lundu who is from the Southern Highlands arranged a police escort for us. Our trip back was uneventful but the police car got a flat tire. We were close enough to home to go on by ourselves and our trip was uneventful except for the expected bumps and jars and swaying back and forth along the washboard/cheese grater road.

Once home I had the best shower of my life! Running warm water is such a luxury! I will never take it for granted again! This was a great adventure that made me fall more in love with my PNG friends and my friend Kathy.

Thank you, Lord, that I could experience this incredible ladies conference and what life is like without running water and toilets and a bed and privacy! I am grateful for the many blessings that you have given me. Please help me to be a blessing to others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.