

Student Culture at Africa Nazarene University: Kenya

Tim Crutcher

In one sense, the joys and struggles of university life—of finding one’s way in the world and preparing oneself for the future—are the same wherever one travels, and a young university student in Africa and one in the United States would find that they have much in common. On the other hand, each culture is unique, and so to some degree, are the ins and outs of preparing to live and serve in that culture. And so, the delights and frustrations of a student at Africa Nazarene University rightly have a character all their own.

Africa Nazarene University was the first liberal arts institution of the Church of the Nazarene outside of North America. Located on about 100 acres across the Nairobi National Park from the city of Nairobi, the campus of Africa Nazarene University is an oasis in the midst of the Masaai Plains. Traveling to the campus from just about anywhere means traveling over some rugged and narrow roads, but once one arrives, one is greeted by a profusion of flowers and beautiful buildings. The campus has often been described as having a “retreat-like” atmosphere, safely tucked away from the hustle and bustle of city life and secure against wander predators (both of the two–legged and four–legged variety).

Since taking in its first students in 1994, ANU has grown to a student population of about 600 and just recently (on October 8, 2002) earned her full accreditation (called a “charter”) from the government of Kenya. ANU is the sixth private university to do so in Kenya, and the only one to have done it in less than ten years.

Like university students all over the world, the students of ANU face uncertainties about their personal futures, struggle at times with the financial concerns of attending a university, and worry about whether they will be able to find jobs—particularly as most of the economies of Africa wrestle with high unemployment and undervalued labor. But there are more than enough joys and benefits to match these struggles.

For one thing, most of the students of ANU are simply grateful to have a place to attend university. The demand for education in Kenya and in all of Africa far outstrips its supply, as education is seen to be the best way to better oneself in our increasingly “globalized” world. In Kenya, which has more universities than any Africa country outside of South Africa, there is still only enough space for one in four qualified candidates. In many other countries, that percentage is much lower. The most qualified students are given full scholarships to the state universities, but everyone else is left to fend for themselves. ANU thus provides opportunities for education for more than just Nazarenes.

Some students come to ANU because it is their Nazarene school. Others come because they want to study in a Christian environment, away from the perceived immoral environment of many secular schools. But many of them come because ANU provides them with the only opportunity they will probably get to further their education.

This makes the composition of the student body at ANU very diverse. From deeply committed Christians to nominal Christians to people who have no religious affiliation to Muslims, the students span the range of religious possibilities. Of course, that makes ANU something of a mission field in itself, and the lecturers, administration, and staff all have the chance to share their faith and the difference it makes in their lives. Many students who came to ANU with only nominally Christian and non-Christian backgrounds have found Christ as a result of chapel services, religion classes and interactions with their fellow students. It is through the latter that the greatest impact, however, is

undoubtedly made, through the testimony of the deeply committed Christian students, both those studying for ministry with the department of religion (both undergraduate and graduate) and those who study in other fields. Their example and student-led services and Bible studies make a greater impact than any faculty or administration member could hope to have.

Of course, religious diversity isn't the only kind of diversity ANU enjoys. Though most of the students at ANU come from Kenya, her constituency is an area three times as large as the continental United States, and many more times as diverse. This diversity at a place like ANU allows students to encounter people from all over Africa and all over the world and acquire a broad, even global, perspective on life and faith. Where many places in Africa are deeply divided over issues of race and culture, students at ANU experience a place where various races and cultures—which have had and continue to have their share of conflicts—can live and work together in a true community.

A good example of that happened just recently as the community at ANU was preparing for the celebration of the awarding of its charter. One Wednesday, all classes were cancelled, and the students (about 450 out of 600) volunteered their time to help clean and work on the campus to prepare for the visit of the Kenyan president. Given that university campuses are usually hot-beds for violence and unrest in Kenya, the ANU work day provided people a glimpse of another kind of reality. One visitor to the campus on that day, a reporter for a local news company, said that they have never seen anything like that. Many of the students affirm that they learned from that event what true community really means.

Forming a community is one of the things that ANU is all about, an essential part of its three-fold motto, along with forming character and building professional competence. It is also essential because true community is something that the continent of Africa needs to rediscover. One of the challenges faced by the students of ANU, a challenge that many of them grew up and even more will face as they

go out into the world after graduation, is the challenge of building community. African society has recently become very fragmented under the weight of the processes of urbanization and Westernization, and the historically important cultural values of community have been overshadowed, if not lost completely. Along with this fragmentation has come even greater political unrest and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Of course, the news is not all bad. Today's Africa is re-discovering herself in a variety of ways, and many students at ANU look forward to the ways in which they can participate in that. Right now, in the face of general elections at the end of 2002, many see Kenya poised on the brink of real political change. There are spirited debates on campus as to the direction that change can take, but the mere possibility of such debates indicates a strong hope in the future. The technological level of Kenya has been rising rapidly in the past few years, and those business and computer majors who have done their studies well feel prepared to "ride the wave", as it were, helping their country find its own technological and economic footing. And, at the bottom of it all, there is the issue of people who need help, and the students—through participation in campus wide food and clothing drives—have already begun to turn the advantages they've been given into blessings for others.

So there are great challenges faces the students of ANU when they think about their futures, but it is in those very challenges that they may find their greatest joys. When they finish their studies, they know that they go out into an Africa that is crying for change, but they also know—and may if they wish find joy in knowing—that in such a situation they can make a real difference.

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