

## **A Wonderful African Success Story**

Richard P. Phelps

Two decades ago, I traveled to Burkina Faso, in the African Sahel region, to teach mathematics. There, I would enjoy the company of extraordinarily friendly people and cooperative students, improve my woeful French, and travel around West Africa some as a tourist. Also, I would experience dust storms, heat rashes, a scorpion sting, and several illnesses, some of which I could identify and some of which I could not.

My village, Baskouré, lay about a hundred kilometers east of the capital, Ouagadougou [WA-ga-DOO-goo]. Except for the school and the adjoining church buildings, the standard architecture was adobe and thatch. The business of the village was farming, mostly in millet. With only a few exceptions, the students were farmers' kids, though only several of them were from Baskouré. Others came from as far as 80 kilometers away by dirt road or path.

Séminaire St. Augustin was a lower secondary school that was adding upper secondary grades, one year at a time. The curriculum was national, modeled after the French, and high-stakes, national examinations concluded both the lower and upper secondary levels.

I was the first American any of the students had met. They asked me many times why I had come there, and I replied frankly. I had come to Burkina for a selfish reason - I sought adventure - I wanted to live for a time in a place and in a culture that was very different from my own.

Burkina certainly was different. It has often ranked among the world's bottom ten countries in per capita income. Burkina has few natural resources of exportable value, and the rains can be fickle. During my two-year stay, the rains were particularly feeble and the dust particularly bothersome, and the farmers suffered. Even worse, the summer I returned to the United States, West Africa endured a 17-year-locust plague.

I kept up correspondence with my school for several years as the return mail slowed to a trickle and my students and fellow teachers moved on. I assumed that I would never see any of them again. I also assumed that their lives would be tightly circumscribed, both occupationally and geographically, not for any lack of ability or desire, but due to their and their country's poverty, and an accompanying absence of opportunities.

Then, a few weeks ago, one of my former students found me. He was in McLean, Virginia for the summer, trying to improve his English, and saying mass at St. John the Beloved church. He is now Father Alphonse Kaboré and lives in Rome while he pursues a doctorate in theology at the Vatican. Father Kaboré also speaks at least four other languages.

He gave me a quick summary of the fates of my other former students. He could not place 14 of them, but here's what some of the others are doing: 21 are priests, 15 are teachers, and three are university professors. Among the rest are two doctors, two lawyers, two accountants, two diplomats (one for Burkina and one for the Vatican), one school principal, one businessman, one customs official, and three working in telecommunications, a non-governmental organization, and the military. Nine more are currently enrolled in doctoral programs in Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States.

I was dumbfounded. These boys had next to nothing. School facilities were spartan. The boys slept in bunk beds in two large rooms without screens. They grew their own food and received some donations from European charities and the U.S. Food for Peace program. They got by with torn-up and marked-up hand-me-down textbooks donated from France. Amenities consisted of a few soccer balls and a dirt field. The regimen of Séminaire St. Augustin consisted of study, work, and, as it was a religious school, the practice of their faith.

Once, twenty years ago, a student in Alphonse Kaboré's class asked me which were the better students: those I knew in America or those I knew in Africa. Without hesitation, I identified the latter. How could that be, another student inquired, given that America is so rich and successful. "Because life there can be too easy," I replied.