



RCA Missionary Update

from the Johnsons

The Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger (EERN is its acronym in French) is the RCA's mission partner in Niger. Founded shortly after Niger's national independence in 1961, EERN is the oldest and largest Protestant denomination in this Muslim-majority (98 percent) country.

Located in the Sahara Desert, Niger is the world's poorest country (174th out of 177 on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, a composite measure of life expectancy, education, and living standard), and 50 percent of its population is under the age of 15. EERN ministries reflect this context: they focus on evangelization, education, health, and community development.

Tom Johnson, an international development specialist, and his wife, Aïchatou, represent RCA missions in Niger. They have two daughters, Marie-Florence and Laurey.

Niger facts:

- Population: 11,361,000
- Size: 1,266,700 square kilometers (slightly less than twice the size of Texas)
- Major religion: 98 percent Muslim



MINISTRY

Community Development

LOCATION

Niger

PARTNER

Evangelical Church of Niger,
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Hello Everyone,

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We're back in Niger after our five months of home assignment in the U.S. Traveling around with two toddlers in tow, plus a wife in her first and second trimesters of pregnancy was challenging, to say the least. We missed our home in Niger and the routines and relationships which we have established there. Although we always enjoy seeing our family and friends, we found it a bit more difficult on this trip to integrate ourselves in U.S. life as our ties to Niger now seem stronger and our American connections a bit more tenuous. The girls, however, soared in developing their English skills during our time there—while their French and Hausa almost vanished!

We (about half the time it was just Tom) visited at least 28 churches and received much love and encouragement from so many people while in the USA. These visits are both reviving (when churches are really interested in our work) and draining (from the tediousness of travel and the necessity of repeating ourselves every week). Our Nigerien colleagues and friends describe our time in the U.S. as a "rest" or "vacation," but I always correct them by explaining that there's a lot of work involved, as many of you know. One important reason for us staying five months (instead of three) was to replace funds from the Presbyterian Church (USA) that are to stop in mid-2008. We're pleased to announce that through the generous support of RCA churches, we are now fully supported.

For those of you who receive our email updates, you are already aware of the nightmare which befell us trying to leave the United States to return to Niger. While checking in at the Des Moines, Iowa airport, we couldn't find our two girls' U.S. passports. This threw everyone in a panic and the counter person said that she couldn't let us fly without an I.D. for the girls, even though they and their photos were listed on their mother's Nigerien family passport and kids on U.S. domestic flights don't need I.D. So, we left the airport and went back to my parents' home to look for the passports. We never did find them. We would have liked to have gotten replacement passports for them both, but because Marie had been born in Niger, we didn't have her birth documents in the U.S. to complete her passport application. Time was of the essence in all of this because 11 people (including my parents) from my home church in Leighton, IA were scheduled to arrive in Niger as a work team 8 days after our original departure! We sent out several requests for prayer as we considered how we would get our family back to Niger, as it once appeared the best option would be for Tom to leave at once and for the rest of the family to come later! The prayers did work and we again spoke to people at the airline and got them to agree that Aïchatou's passport was legitimate for underage children, since our international carrier, Royal Air Maroc, recognized it. So, we arrived in Niger just 38 hours before eleven visitors from Iowa came!

Hosting the eleven visitors one calendar day after we arrived, went as well as could be expected. First of all, we were immensely helped by our mission and church colleagues in Niger (such as my assistant, Usman, and new RCA missionaries Jeremy and Susan Beebout), who arranged many of the larger details concerning housing, transportation and work materials for them. Next, we had a great group of volunteers, since I had known them all for most of my life. Even though the vast majority of them had never experienced a developing country before, they understood our problematic situation and everyone dealt with the circumstances in an exceptional manner, including the 12-hour drive (both ways) over bad roads into the bush.

Aïchatou and I were a bit embarrassed that we didn't even have the opportunity to properly arrange the house before the guests arrived, yet alone give it a good scrubbing after five months of vacancy, but since our guardian had swept (and somewhat dusted) it before we came, it could have been much worse. The group experienced some of the nastiest harmattan weather I have seen and this Saharan dust was omnipresent during their entire stay, adding to the general dirtiness. Additionally, the volunteer men found themselves digging a foundation for an addition to our house and mixing cement by hand, so



Addition to our house

there was a sense that no one was ever very clean. The women were charged with keeping us all fed and they did a marvelous job using the limited ingredients that were available, relying on Aïchatou for advice and instruction in many cases. I was pleased that our electrical and plumbing systems generally coped with 17 people—due to the poor quality of materials we have here—with most of our minor problems being fixable. And remarkably, there was only one short power cut during the seven days they stay with us at Dogon Gao. The addition they worked on (seen here after local workers continued on it) will serve as a classroom for our girls, provide us with more tool and project storage as well as a shelter for our vehicle.

Our hardworking team did take the weekend off to visit Zinder (another 3 hour drive) and meet Aïchatou's family. It was the first time that our parents had met. The group saw their family's farm, their machine shop and the new EERN Christian primary school. All 17 of us stayed in either the parents' home or that of her brother, Abari. On Sunday, Rev. Mark, pastor at Leighton, preached at the



Zinder church visit

EERN church there and the whole team sang one song (See picture) before sharing a large meal with the whole Abba Moussa clan in Zinder. Then it was back to Dogon Gao and to work. The team finished the addition's foundation and started on the walls before it was time to return to Niamey. The women found the time to paint several of the Bible School's classroom blackboards, too.

We only get about two weeks as a family at Dogon Gao before our plans have us apart again. Aïchatou and the girls are returning to Zinder in early March to prepare for our third child's arrival (due date is April 1), since her family is there and the health facilities are better. I'll help out a bit with another volunteer team from New Life in Coralville, IA (the Beebouts' home church) about the time she and the girls leave. Meanwhile, we're getting our Dogon Gao home prepared for the new arrival and for our family's functioning.

PRAYERS AND PRAISES

- We give thanks that we were able to return to Niger as a family before the volunteer team arrived despite all of our previous problems with lost passports.
- We're thankful that the team from Ebenezer Reformed in Leighton, IA was able to come and experience Niger with us without any problems. We're very grateful for the resources they brought, which will result in our girls having a dedicated classroom for their learning and will provide us with some much needed storage space, allowing us to better separate our work and family lives.
- Pray for Aïchatou and for the safe delivery of a health baby in Zinder. Everything appears to be normal at this point, but your prayers are coveted.
- Pray for our family to quickly re-adjust to our life and responsibilities in Niger and that the family (particularly the girls) will adapt to a new baby in the house.

In Christ,

Tom and Aïchatou

Tom, Aïchatou, Marie-Florence and Laurey