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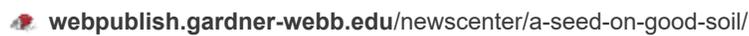
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Office of University Communications

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A Seed on Good Soil



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“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” – Luke 8:15

When Gardner-Webb’s current Missionary in Residence, Mike Boone, first sensed a call to ministry, it never occurred to him that he could be something other than a preacher. “I wish someone had told me to sit down and ask myself, ‘What do I like to do?’,” Boone says. “I’ve always loved working outside, working with plants. I love to see things grow. But I didn’t know I could use that for ministry.” God knew better.

A farm boy from Alabama, Boone chose to attend Samford University for his bachelor’s degree, because Samford offered a religious studies major that would propel him on to seminary. He met his future wife, Amy, during his last semester at Samford, and he served as a youth pastor while Amy finished her student teaching.

Though they were perfect for each other, Mike says the marriage almost didn’t happen. Ironically, Amy sensed a strong call to global missions, a call Mike did not initially share. She even turned down Mike’s first marriage proposal. Amy ultimately decided, though, that if God decided to call them to missions, He would change Mike’s heart—a decision that set the course of their future life together. The couple married in 1987 and went on to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, before moving to serve a church in Salemburg, N.C. in 1990.

It was in Salemburg that the Boones’ children were born: Tim, who will be a freshman this fall at Carson-Newman College; and Grace, who will be a senior at Crest High School. It was in Salemburg that their calling to international missions was born as well. “We didn’t want to do just traditional church planting,” Boone remembers. “We wanted to do some kind of community development work. I grew up on a small farm and have always loved agriculture, so I decided to go to N.C. State and earn a degree in agriculture, so that we could do that sort of development in the mission field.”

After finishing his agriculture degree in 1997, the Boones were appointed through the International Mission Board, and were given a stack of potential missions destinations. “We considered a bunch of countries,” Boone explains. “Burkina Faso, Mali, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Mongolia, and then Mozambique. Neither of us had even heard of Mozambique before. But Amy and I decided we’d give it a couple of weeks and then come together and see what topped our lists. Mozambique was on top for both of us.”

The Boones were attracted to the job description in Mozambique, which involved small scale agricultural development, where they could use farming as a tool to do theological education—an opportunity to plant seeds of hope and truth in the hearts of Mozambique’s people. But

like farming, missionary work is rarely glamorous and often dangerous, and a crop is produced only by great perseverance. The Boones' worked through almost constant adversity in Mozambique from 1998 until 2003, until Mike's repeated and nearly fatal bouts of malaria forced them to leave that ministry community.

"We had to go south to escape the malaria threat," Boone says, "so we went as far south as we possibly could on that continent—Cape Town, South Africa." The transition was like moving to a whole new world. "We lived in a small town in Mozambique, about 20,000 people. Then all of a sudden we're in Cape Town, with over four million people speaking 11 different languages, and we're encountering more people in a 20-minute drive in Cape Town than we would have in an 8-hour drive in Mozambique. Plus, we had to take on a completely new ministry assignment in the urban setting. It was a challenge."

No longer able to plant literal seeds, the Boones found themselves planting churches, trying to empower local believers to lead their own congregations. "The spiritual landscape in Cape Town is tough, because of the prevalence of African Indigenous Churches, or AICs. They blend Christianity with traditional African religious practices, like prayer to ancestors, ritual sacrifices, miracle healing, things like that. The current President, Jacob Zuma, is a traditionalist, so those practices are very open," Boone explains. After three or four years in Cape Town, Boone says, "traditional church planting just didn't seem to take. No doors were opening."

Furthermore, though free from the threat of malaria, the Boones were now subject to a very new danger—violent crime. Since moving to Cape Town, Boone's wife Amy has been hijacked at gunpoint, his daughter Grace and several friends were mugged by several young men, and just last October, his son Tim was mugged at knifepoint. Boone admits that, at these times, the threat of danger to his family was almost too much to bear. "I always ask the question, what if? What if they'd stabbed my son? What if those guys had pulled the trigger? What if the men had decided to be more violent with my daughter? But we can't ask those questions, or at least I've learned not to," Boone says.

Still, Boone solace comes from confidence in God's calling for his life. "I remember what another missionary once told me, a woman who had lived, single, as a nurse in Zambia for years. She said, 'The safest place for any of us is in the center of God's will.' It really doesn't matter where you are, whether it's Boiling Springs, North Carolina, or the deepest, darkest jungles. If you're where God wants you, then that's the safest place to be."

Now, after years of faithful sowing in Cape Town, the Boones are finally sharing in the joy of an awesome harvest. Recently, the Boones and their colleagues worked their way into several primary schools in Cape Town, teaching Life Orientation classes and planting the seeds of the gospel in the students' lives. "We teach them about general nutrition, general health, as well as their sexual development, HIV education, those sorts of topics. We also have a chance to share with them about making wise decisions and taking responsibility for

their actions,” Boone explains. Though the curriculum is not explicitly evangelical, Boone says it’s simple to work elements of the Gospel into the classroom. Amy and Grace, along with other missionary ladies, have also begun tutoring the children after school, and have launched boys and girls clubs to help continue building mentoring relationships.

“When we left South Africa this winter, we were working with three schools and seeing about 600 kids each week,” Boone says. “Since we’ve been gone, our colleague has added a fourth school, so that ministry has continued to grow.” Boone’s group has even begun a Friday after-school worship experience, which 150-250 children are attending each week. “A lot of kids are coming to Christ now, and they’re being disciplined. It’s pretty great, but it’s taken a long time to get there.”

Now, as Gardner-Webb’s Missionary in Residence through Spring 2012, Boone has the opportunity to share his unique perspective on God’s global work with a variety of students on campus. One of his responsibilities is to teach sections of Old Testament Survey for the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. “The kind of perspective Mike will be able to bring our students will be tremendous, because teachers always bring part of their personalities into the classroom. The illustrations Mike will use will be illustrations from another culture. That adds to the educational value for our students,” said Dr. Kent Blevins, chair of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. Boone’s wife, Amy, is also serving as a musical accompanist for students in the Department of Music.

Boone also plans to work with the Office of Christian Life and Service to create a support system for students who are Missionary Kids and Third Culture Kids. He also hopes to connect with students who are interested in pursuing global missions. “I want them to find their own unique spiritual gifts, and use those for ministry,” Boone says. “A call to ministry and a call to preaching are not necessarily the same thing. You may want to be a businessperson, or a teacher, or a farmer, or a veterinarian. There are outlets for all of those desires in the mission field—God can use any of them.”

Boone’s own interest in agriculture is living proof of that truth, the same truth contained in Jesus’s parable of the sower. Even after all the work and perseverance in the mission field, Boone’s efforts to sow seeds in good soil are still yielding a return in Boiling Springs. For one, Boone has helped a group of students launch the first ever community garden project at Gardner-Webb. But even more important, Boone is ready to plant whatever seeds of wisdom, guidance, and truth he can in the soil of Gardner-Webb’s student body.

“I have been deeply impressed with Mike’s hospitality, and his openness to reaching our students. His spirit of encouragement is evident in the way he’s able to gently guide people,” said Dr. Tracy Jessup, vice president for Christian life and service at Gardner-Webb.

“Whether it’s cultivating a garden, or as I’ve sensed, cultivating students’ spiritual life, there is just a real gentleness and a genuineness about Mike and Amy both. It’s truly a blessing to have them here.”