

THE SYNOD OF THE NORTHEAST

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consulting, facilitating, partnering in mission

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TO: Executive Presbyters, Stated Clerks and Presbytery Moderators
FROM: Clint McCoy, Executive for Partnerships
Lida Dawson Prince and Debby Brincivalli, Co-conveners Madagascar Partnership Group
RE: Synod and PC(USA) Intervention in Unjust Deportation
DATE: June 24, 2009

Dear Colleagues in Ministry:

This morning I asked myself whether, through the establishment of an international mission partnership between the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM) and the Synod of the Northeast prior to the turn of this century, God meant to build relationships and sow seeds for a time such as this. Tuesday afternoon we learned that the President of the Church, The Rev. Lala Rasendrahassina, was deported from the United States upon his attempted re-entry. Rev. Rasendrahassina originally left Madagascar in mid-March, fearing for his safety, following a coup d'Etat that ousted the democratically elected President, the Hon. Marc Ravalomanana. He and his family have been here, living at Calvin Seminary, on a perfectly good visa. As we had reported last spring, before fleeing Madagascar, Rev. Rasendrahassina had been detained, humiliated and assaulted by those who had fomented the coup. The Synod helped Rev. Rasendrahassina, his wife and teen-aged son come temporarily to the United States for their safety.

Earlier this month, Rev. Rasendrahassina was asked by the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar, of which he is President, to return to Madagascar for the semi-annual meeting of the church's National Council, a central policy-making organ of the church which had been forced to postpone its regular meeting by the political crisis in the country. Rev. Rasendrahassina contacted US immigration officials and was advised that there was no legal impediment to his attending the meeting and re-entering the United States afterwards since he had a multi-entry visa. His return to Madagascar was assisted by the U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo, which also advised him on appropriate visa arrangements.

We, and colleagues at the General Assembly level, were consequently alarmed to learn that Rev. Rasendrahassina was prevented from re-entering the United States on June 23, 2009 by Customs and Border Protection officials at Detroit Airport. Moreover, he was deported from the United States, to Amsterdam, within a few hours. In that the US Government paid for his deportation, a five-year ban on his re-entry into the United States has been triggered. When PC(USA) officials learned of the situation, they immediately offered to pay the cost of the flight, but were told that it was too late to do so.

It is highly possible, given the current circumstances in Madagascar, that the safety of Rev. Rasendrahassina and his family would be in jeopardy there without protections established. PC(USA) officials believe Rev. Rasendrahassina acted appropriately and in good faith in his efforts to secure temporary entry into the United States during this period of instability in Madagascar.

Rev. Rasendrahasina is currently stranded in Amsterdam, while the rest of his family is still in the United States. I am writing for with four basic things in mind:

- 1) First, I wanted to make information about Rev. Rasendrahasina's deportation known throughout the synod. He and his wife Zoe were part of a small delegation that visited us in March, 2007. Please share information about his deportation with your presbytery leaders, with church pastors and clerks. We want them to know that their church is at work, amidst powers and principalities, not only for Rev. Rasendrahasina's restitution to his family and his proper status as a guest of this country, but at work as well in the interests of constitutional government and the rule of law in Madagascar.
- 2) Second, we ask for your prayers. Pray for our all of those who are working towards Lala's release and return to his family, that decisions and actions be wise, that God's timing will be perfect, that Lala will have suitable accommodations and support while he waits for resolution, that his family will be emotionally and spiritually supported during the separation, and that the circumstances both in Madagascar and the FJKM there, and in Lala's life, will all be woven together for good.
- 3) While we believe that the U.S. government's action to deport Rev. Rasendrahasina was a grave error, we also believe the situation is redeemable. The PC(USA) has promised to cover the costs related to Rev. Rasendrahasina's case, including transportation. The synod has already assisted with the family's flight to safety in March, and will willingly share this burden as well because of the generosity of people who understand the value of partnership in gospel. Funds in a custodial account have been substantially depleted by these circumstances; synod would of course welcome designated contributions in this ministry of peace and justice if they were so earmarked.