

Chapter 10

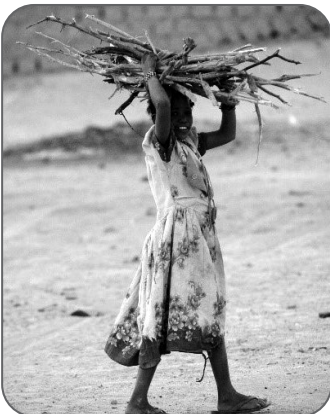
Choice

by Cecilia Cheung

When I was eleven years old, I went for a holiday with my family to my birth country, Malaysia. I remember the long flight over the Pacific Ocean, the humid heat, the delicious food, and a little girl.

We landed in Kota Kinabalu and piled into a taxi to make the trip to the mountain town of Ranau. We stopped several times along the way to pick up snacks and enjoy the views. I noticed a little girl sitting by the roadside selling fruit at one stop. The sight struck me as odd. So I asked my mother, “Why is she selling bananas and not in school?” My mother gently answered, “You’re assuming she has a choice.”

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world and consistently ranks amongst the lowest on the United Nation’s Human Development Index. With a life expectancy of sixty years and the world’s highest birth rate, it is not surprising that half of the population is under fifteen. Niger’s literacy rate is 35 percent, with the average child attending school for only six years. There are 0.04 physicians for every 1,000 Nigeriens, and 31 percent of children under five are underweight.





In this country, my husband Ace and I, along with our daughters, Elise and Iyla, served from 2006 to 2022 with The Alliance Canada. Over those sixteen years, my mother's words would echo in my mind as the concept of choice informed me.

Our Journey Begins

Our journey to Niger began in 1992 during a missions conference at South Edmonton Alliance Church. Eric Persson, a former international worker to Burkina Faso with The Alliance Canada, asked, "If God ever called you into full-time ministries, would you obey Him?" At the time, Ace and I were university students and not yet married. Although we had never discussed a future in full-time ministries and were not sitting together at the conference, we were both prompted by the Holy Spirit to make our way to the front to indicate we would be willing to obey.

Life carried on after the missions conference. Ace earned his Bachelor of Science and Doctor of Medicine Degrees from the University of Alberta and began practicing family medicine in Edmonton, Alberta. He would later acquire a Master of Public Health from the University of Waterloo and study tropical medicine at Johns Hopkins University. I also studied at the University of Alberta. After earning a Bachelor of Commerce Degree and a Master of Business Administration, I worked in commercial marketing in the construction and utility industries.

By 2002, Ace and I had been married for five years and were about to embark on an adventure with The Alliance Canada. The first stop was a roadside restaurant on Gasoline Alley in Red Deer, Alberta, to meet with Ron and Myra Brown, seasoned international workers to several African countries and Canadian regional developers with The Alliance Canada. The meeting was followed by many others and much prayer as we discerned how and where God could use us. The Alliance Canada was actively seeking workers for Africa, and we were willing to go where our skills could best be used. This is how we were paired with Niger.

The following four years went by in a flash. Ace scaled down his medical practice and took seminary courses. Our two daughters were born. We moved to Quebec City to study French for a year at the University of Laval. Our language learning did not end there, however. While French would serve us well in government offices and daily life once we landed in Niamey, Niger, in 2006, we needed a local language to engage Nigeriens at their heart level. We spent an additional two years studying Zarma. Years later, we would find ourselves in language learning once again. This time it was Tamajaq, as our ministries and relationships focused more exclusively on Tuaregs.

During our season of language learning, we also took the opportunity to pray over and learn about Niger, its different people groups and what our future would look like. As we did this, we clearly saw that God brought us to Niger to engage in holistic ministries.

Holistic Ministries

Amartya Kumar Sen, the 1998 Nobel Prize winner for economics, said, “Poverty is the absence of meaningful choices.” Dr. Sen’s statement about choice is compelling. I have freely made choices throughout my life. The choice to go to school. The choice to marry. The choice to be a parent. The choice to work. The choice to follow Jesus. This, however, is not everyone’s experience.

Poverty is the
absence of
meaningful choices.

~ Amartya Kumar Sen



It is difficult, if not impossible, for choice to exist without access. Our time in Niger was primarily about participating in God's offering of options to Nigeriens through providing access to the Gospel, healthcare, and education. Through holistic ministries, we loved and cared for the whole person; however, bringing access to the gospel message undergirded our work, for *"what good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?"* (Matthew 16:26a)

In 2010 the Niger Vocational Training Centre (NVOC), a sewing school, was started by our colleague, Chantelle McIver, in partnership with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Through NVOC, we have impacted the lives of at-risk girls with little to no formal education.

Through the ministry of NVOC, we offer parents a choice to educate and train their daughters in the country with the highest child marriage rate in the world. In Niger, the legal age to marry is fifteen, and 76 percent of girls are married before they turn eighteen. Being in the program gives girls a chance to grow physically and vocationally and in their self-esteem and self-worth.

Students receive vocational training and attend French, math, health, and biblical values classes over a three-year program. Christian values and Bible stories are incorporated into the curriculum so students can openly ask questions about faith in a safe environment. Moreover, celebration days are intentionally set aside each year at Christmas and Easter, where stories of Jesus's birth and resurrection are shared and discussed.

Being vocationally trained and empowered with increased literacy in French, numeracy, and knowledge about women's health opens up the world of choices for students upon graduation. For many, there is the choice to work and the

ability to make a case for themselves when parents arrange marriages since they can inform their parents about the risks and dangers of early marriage. After marriage, students are better equipped to make decisions about family planning, how to raise and educate their children, and how to build healthy households.

Prayer for students and staff is a regular part of NVOC. Often prayers are offered



for family members needing a job or for health concerns. For example, one day, I received a hurried call from the head sewing teacher asking me to come to the school quickly because one of the students was sick. When I arrived, a student named Holly was sleeping on a mat outside in the shade. When I tried to rouse her, she did not wake. I asked the sewing teacher what happened, and she said a spirit was attacking Holly regularly and making her faint. At this point, I called Ace and asked him to come to the school. When he arrived, he examined Holly; her physical condition was normal. Soon after, Holly's mother arrived. We asked her if we could pray for Holly in

Jesus' name. Ace and I began praying when she agreed, and Holly started waking up. Seeing how our prayers worked, Holly's mother started chanting in Arabic. As she did, Holly's eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she fell back unconscious. Ace and I continued praying. After a few minutes, we noticed Holly starting to cry, and then she awoke. When she came to, she was physically fine, was of sound mind, and went back into the school to finish off the day.

Two weeks later, Holly pulled me aside. She told me that a month prior, she walked outside her hut and saw a black goat buried up to its neck in the sand in her family courtyard with herbs burning around it. Shortly after, she began having fainting spells. This was a sure sign that the family had been hexed. It was a privilege to witness Holly's deliverance from the curse. When we met at a wedding two years later, she testified she had not fainted again.

Friendships naturally grew out of relationships with sewing students. Alma was one such friend. I visited her at her family compound every week for years. We would sit under the shade of a hanger (an open-sided straw shelter) and share



cups of strong, sugary Tuareg tea as the family's goats and sheep milled around us. During these visits, we talked about our families, different cultures, dreams, joys, heartbreaks, and faith. I wish I could say Alma accepted Jesus as her Saviour, but she politely and gently declined as I shared the good news of Jesus. However, her rejection of the Gospel did not end our weekly visits or our friendship. As the Father loves unconditionally and without discrimination, so must we because bringing access to Jesus is but one aspect of loving the whole person.

Other relationships developed because people heard about us. People like a young woman named Bella sought us out because she heard "the church helps people."

In 2019, The Alliance Canada partnered with a local Nigerien church, l'Église Baptiste Évangélique Emmanuel Goudel, and NVOC relocated to its compound. The church is pastored by Pastor Amadou and his wife Hassi, well-known in the neighbourhood for being wise, loving, and compassionate.

When Hassi and I first met Bella, she was alone and desperate. She had made poor life choices, leading to a cycle of abuse and dangerous situations. Little by little, however, she started spending more time in the church compound, attending Sunday service and Bible study. Soon after, she gave her heart to Jesus and committed to live a life of purity.

Forgiven, loved, and armed with hope, Bella dared to dream about her future. She wanted to be a tailor, but NVOC was already at capacity, so we enrolled her

in another Christian sewing school. Three years after our first meeting, Bella is on track to graduate as a tailor. She is also married to a loving man and was blessed with a daughter.

Another Nigerien church we engaged with is l'Église Évangélique Internationale Riyad (EEI Riyad). Church members were pivotal in helping us care for and secure a safe home for a Tuareg widow with three young children.

Ally lost her husband Ray in 2020 when he was hit by a truck while riding his bicycle to work. Ray was our first house guard. He was open-minded, friendly, and loyal to a fault. Ace and Ray's friendship grew over the years as they shared significant life events. As they studied the Bible together, they debated and openly discussed the freedoms and sacrifices which came with putting one's faith in Jesus. We cannot be sure if Ray accepted Jesus as his Saviour before he died. We count it a privilege, however, how Ace was able to share the Gospel with Ray in the years prior and how we continue our relationship with his widow and children.

After Ray's death, Ally had little means to support herself and her children aside from a small widow's pension from the government. Nevertheless, she chose to remain in the city rather than return to her family's village because her children wanted to go to school.

With the help of EEI Riyad church members, God led us to the perfect rental unit. It is a small, safe space with electricity and running water. Moreover, it is in the same neighbourhood as church members, so Ally and her children have support nearby who are committed to sharing the Gospel with them in word and deed. We are also thankful for ministry partners who recorded teachings about God and Jesus in Tamajaq (the language of Tuaregs) so Ally can hear them in her own language on a solar mp3 player.

We also partnered with self-governing urban Tuareg men's cooperatives, Animataf and Tazedirte. Ace built relationships with heads of households which opened doors to spiritual conversations. Trust was built slowly over the course of several years, and the men allowed Ace to share God's Word at their monthly meetings. These gatherings were part of relief and development programs such as subsidized food aid and animal distributions.

Food aid distributions typically include 50 kilograms of rice, one kilogram of milk powder, and five litres of oil for each member of the cooperative, subsidized at half price. Distributions usually occur monthly for four to six months, depending on the severity of the food shortage. Alleviating food insecurity, even for a few months, allows heads of households to peacefully search for work while maintaining food on the table. This, in turn, means healthier families, fewer absences from school, and less stress in homes.

Animal distributions typically include goats and sheep offered to cooperative members at subsidized prices. Female animals are raised for milk and offspring potential, while male animals are raised for sale. Like food aid, subsidized animal distributions decrease food insecurity and increase income-generating prospects for the families.

Despite trusting relationships built over years of working together, a cloud of fear looms over these men, preventing them from openly pursuing Christianity. For example, one Tuareg man said someone could attend church a few times a year, but others would shun them if they attended more often. Another young Tuareg man used to visit a follower of Jesus to investigate Christianity, but his family eventually forbade him to continue the visits.

Ace had the opportunity to share Jesus's words from Matthew 10 at a food aid distribution, not to fear those who can only kill the body and not the soul, but rather fear Him, who can destroy both body and soul. He reminded the men that the food is distributed to concretely show love to the Tuaregs because we were first loved by God. Running the distribution does not help our salvation, and the food is not given as a way of buying them to become Christians. Rather, we share what we have, including the truth about God, because we cannot keep good things to ourselves. A believer at the meeting shared how it is like finding water in the desert – you cannot keep it to yourself; you must share it. After hearing this, the young Tuareg man dared to visit the follower of Jesus to ask questions about Christianity again.

Working amongst a predominately illiterate Tuareg population meant we could be creative in making the Gospel accessible. One way was through broadcasting radio programs in partnership with SIM International mission.

Five radio stations broadcast Bible programs in Tamajaq fifteen times a week. These programs reach across Niger, including areas of insecurity. Listeners are encouraged to call a phone number to discuss aired programs or ask questions. Believers who field the calls also visit listeners, bring Bibles as requested, and offer additional Christian programs through WhatsApp or SD cards.

In 2022, on the way to meet a radio program listener, two Tuaregs became the first Christians to visit a remote village in Niger. When they stopped there to share God's Word, the village chief told them they were openly welcomed because they were also Tuaregs. After a night of discussion, the believers met the radio program listener and left an SD card for the chief so he could listen to more stories of truth from the Bible.

The proliferation of smartphones and the use of Apps in Niger opened another door through which we could bring access to the Gospel.

Ace developed two Tamajaq Apps. One is the Tamajaq Bible App, created in

partnership with SIM Niger, SIL International, and Wycliffe International. The App facilitates ease of reading, listening, and sharing of the Word for both literate and oral tradition Tuaregs in Niger. Users can also create images with Tamajaq Bible verses for sharing and export videos, including the audio, so the verse is read aloud while the image is displayed. The second is the Way of Righteousness Tamajaq App, created in partnership with SIM Niger. This App presents a journey through the Bible written and adapted specifically for West Africa.

Throughout our time in Niger, providing medical care, in one form or another,



Dr. Ace screening patients at a cataract clinic with partner agency, the Nigerien Christian Blind Mission

was a steady ministry for Ace. Initially, from our arrival in 2006 until the end of 2008, it was considered safe by the Canadian government for Westerners to travel freely in the country. In this small window of time, Ace led short-term mission teams to remote northwestern Tuareg villages. These teams provided medical and dental care, distributed mosquito nets, taught health topics such as malaria and hygiene, told Bible stories using skits, and offered prayer for the sick.

Ace also ran a part-time outpatient clinic and small pharmacy in our house courtyard in Niamey. He offered free primary care, health education, vaccinations, medication, and prayer to our team's house guards, house helpers, and family members under their charge.

Sometimes, he made house calls like he did to treat Lily, a young Tuareg girl. Lily suffered third-degree burns to her leg and thigh after tripping over a cup of gasoline that spilled onto her

skirt and lit up from a nearby cooking fire.

For wound care visits, Ace packed a Rubbermaid container full of donated dressing supplies and took his Canadian Tire tool bag, which he used as a doctor's bag. At the end of each visit, Lily and her mom prayed with Ace in Jesus' name,



Dr. Ace treating Tuareg men at a mobile clinic near a military base in northwest Niger near the Mali border.

asking Him to heal and care for her.

Lily bravely bore extremely painful dressing changes daily. After weeks of care, her skin began to heal as her wounds no longer hurt to touch, plus she fought off an infection. Like a typical teenager, Lily wanted to celebrate by taking a selfie with Ace! As Ace packed up to leave, Lily said, “Don’t forget.” After a moment, Ace asked, “Don’t forget what?” She replied, “Don’t forget to pray.” Ace reassured her he would not forget. And so, they prayed together with her mom, and this time her grandpa was there too.

Our season as international workers with The Alliance Canada has come to a close. As we reflect on the relationships we have built and the experiences we were afforded, we cannot help but feel overwhelming gratitude. Through holistic ministries, we were the hands and feet of Jesus to those who were poor, who had limited opportunities and few choices. As much as we participated in God’s transforming work amongst Nigeriens, our hearts were truly transformed.



Lyla, Ace, Cecilia, and Elise Cheung

We see God's desire in 1 Timothy 2:4, "[He] *wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.*" What an immense privilege to have taken part in God's heart to reconcile His creation to Himself.

Notes:

1. Names have been changed for privacy
2. Sources used:
 - www.cia.gov (The World Factbook)
 - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/niger/#people-and-society>
 - www.unicef.org
 - <https://data.unicef.org/country/ner/>
 - <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>
 - www.hdr.undp.org
 - <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>