

In Zambia: Looking back ... looking forward

Paul A. Desmarais SJ is Director of Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre (KATC) in Zambia

Let me start by introducing myself. My name is Paul Desmarais and I am a Canadian Jesuit Brother. I grew up on a farm in southwestern Ontario, and I started my novitiate training in 1964. After taking my vows, I attended the University of Guelph and graduated with a BSc in Agriculture in 1971. That same year I was missioned to Zambia. Canada sent six Jesuits to work in Zambia in response to a request from our Father General in Rome. Now I'm the only one still here. The local people say I was young when I first arrived!

I was asked by the major religious superior in Zambia to work with the farmers around Kasisi Mission. And as they say, the rest is history. Initially I actively promoted hybrid seed, fertilizers, pesticides and mechanization. However, after about 15 years working with small-scale farmers, I realized we were on the wrong path. A good colleague of mine, Fr David Shulist SJ, suggested I look at organic farming. At first I thought he was talking rubbish! But after visiting organic farms back in Ontario, I thought there might be something in it. Slowly we transitioned to organic farming.

We've been growing vegetables organically at Kasisi now since 1990, and I can say with confidence that all vegetables can be grown this way. Some people erroneously

believe that organic farming does not require much planning. *Au contraire*. Successful organic farming requires practical experience, an understanding of science and a keen eye to observe what is happening in nature.

In our first years at KATC, we were training farming families in a two-year residential program, but were limited to 10 families. Now we offer mainly 5-day residential sessions and are training 600 to 1,500 people annually. KATC has trained people from across Zambia, from NGOs and from government ministries. KATC has also trained instructors and farmers from neighbouring countries, including Burundi, Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

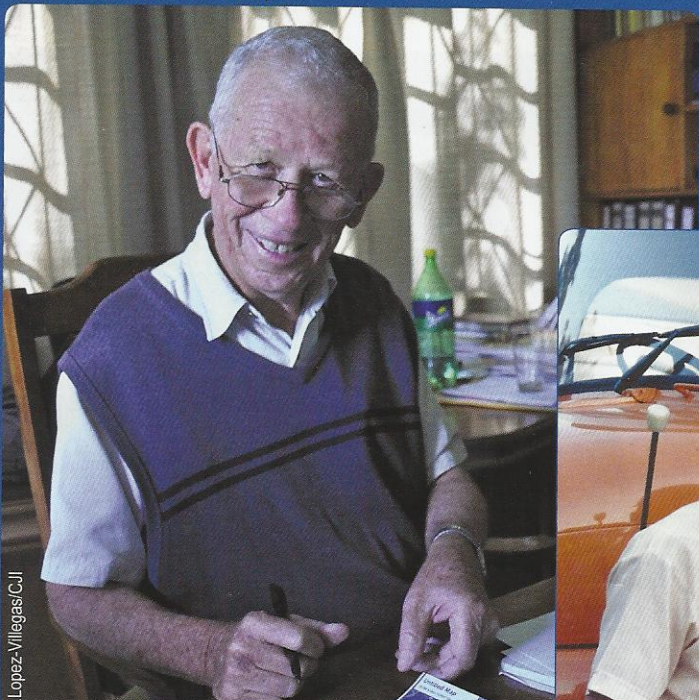
In the early years it was much easier to obtain funding from Canada for projects. Now it is demanding work! There are many documents to be filled in and stringent government regulations. We are very appreciative of the help we've received over the years. Today KATC is well recognized within Zambia, and people associate the name Kasisi with organic farming.

KATC is now looking to generate much more of its own income and resources. We want to add value to our products. At the end of 2016, we began adding value to our milk by making yogurt, soft cheeses and cream. In 2017, we will make rolled oats and groats and also mill wheat using a stone mill. Eventually we also want to extract oil from oil crops and use some of it as biofuel.

I've enjoyed my work over the 45 years that I've lived here. I would encourage young people, both

lay and religious, to be bold and courageous – to do great things for the Lord. Don't be bashful! There will be hiccups along the way but you must not get discouraged. Please visit our website at <http://www.katczm.org>. ■

Br Paul Desmarais SJ today.



Br Paul Desmarais SJ as a young man.

