

# What My Family and I Learned in South Africa

Stephen D. Bryant

**I**n August, 2001, I traveled to South Africa for three months to lay the groundwork for Africa Upper Room Ministries, which now coordinates our Upper Room work throughout the continent. But I didn't go alone. Because of the length of the stay required, the family traveled with me—Marcie my wife, Tim (13), and Marie Claire (10). We traded homes, cars, pets, and schools with Christopher and Leigh Harrison (a clergy couple from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa) and their daughters Alyssa and Shervon. The plans emerged and came together so well on both sides that we couldn't help but wonder, "What does God have in store for us?"

Early on in our time there, the profound experiences began. "September 11" occurred shortly after we arrived while we were traveling toward a community called Pilgrim's Rest in northeastern South Africa near the Mozambique border. More than we even realized then, that name was an indication of what our 3-month stay in that country would be: a pilgrimage that would take us far beyond anything we could have planned.

When South African friends called us on our cell phone and gave us the news of "9-11"—all we could think was that we were in the wrong place. We had to get home, i.e. back home to the USA. We needed to be with our people—our friends, family, and colleagues. We needed to be in our country in its time of trial.

As it turned out, returning by air to the USA was not even an option. We were stuck in what seemed like the remotest corner of the world. So that night, we went ahead and met as planned with an ecumenical group of church leaders with

the Lorrie Walk to Emmaus Community to discuss our common ministry there and efforts to start Emmaus in Mozambique. As the meeting began, the small village lost power and all of the lights went out. There was nothing much to do but pray.

So sitting in the dark 9,000 miles from Nashville, the group prayed for our country and for us. Their prayers were like a candle in the night; they rekindled our



faith and illumined our true location—in God. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name" took on new meaning. We experienced what it means to be at home anywhere God is with us. Even in a mountain village with no power on the other end of the world, our pilgrimage taught us we are no less spiritually connected with those we loved. It was indeed for us a pilgrim's rest.

## Being Human

Over the course of the next few days, we were deeply touched by the outpouring of compassion shown us due to 9-11. In that moment of deep vulnerability for the USA as a nation, the poorest of the poor in South Africa grieved for us, loved us, and had services for us. In the words of

Trevor Hudson, a Methodist pastor from South Africa who addressed us recently at SoulFeast (an Upper Room conference), "In that moment, we did not fear your dominance."

At a roadside stop in an unpopulated mountainous area, poor African men and women selling wooden artifacts to passersby expressed their shock and concern. They asked us, "Who would do this?"

At an extremely remote jungle border crossing into Swaziland, the Swazi border guard reviewed our passports in silence. For a moment I was worried. "American?" he asked, looking down. "Yes," I answered. Then he looked up at me slowly and asked with anguished expression and genuine concern, "Why are they doing this to us?" I could hardly comprehend the question, so struck by his saying "us." And yet we

experienced that sense of solidarity with "us" again and again, as churches and schools throughout the country held prayer services and, even more remarkably, people went to them—to pray for "us," to express their solidarity with "us" in our time of trial.

"Africans have this thing called *Ubuntu*," according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It is a word that literally means, "I am because we are." "Ubuntu," he once wrote, "is about the essence of being human, it is a part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go that extra mile for the sake of others. We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up...in yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself."

In people's spontaneous expressions of care and concern toward the strangers we were, we experienced "Ubuntu," not because we were American, but because we were human.

## *Everyone Is Precious in God's Sight*

Our family had opportunities to work in or witness several ministry settings initiated by Methodist churches in "informal settlements." An example was Diepsloot, an informal settlement of approximately one million residents located on land between two highways not far from where we lived in South Africa. An informal settlement is basically a huge squatter camp dense with shacks sprawling across a field with little or no plumbing, running water, or electricity. There are many throughout the country, and they can spring up overnight and grow rapidly.

We spent some Saturday mornings at the Methodist children's outreach on the edge of Diepsloot, each of us taking assignments for the morning and interacting with the children—one hundred or more. It was fun for us all, but especially memorable for Tim and Marie Claire because they were the same ages as many of the children. What was especially valuable was the simple experience of seeing face to face who actually lived in these sprawling clusters of humanity on hill-sides: real persons, children like ours, children like Tim and Marie Claire who want to play, be noticed, love and be loved, and participate in what's happening in the world no less than us.

With each such experience, we were learning there is no such thing as humanity in general; there are only persons, young and old, each of whom is precious in God's sight.

## *Ministry Is Impossible Without God*

We went over praying the prayer, "Lord, how can we help?" But again and again, the prayer turned into, "Help us, Lord!" We learned again and again that ministry is not about working out of our own resources for God, but working with God out of the resources God gives us.

That's the only way the ministries to which God calls us lead anywhere but to despair.

Marcie was engaged in a weekday soup kitchen in another informal settlement called Olievenhospbosch. A small group of women—women of very modest means—faithfully met in the Westview Methodist Church kitchen each Friday morning with pots of soup from home. They would load some donated bread, maybe cookies, and sometimes donated fruit into cars. "As the people of the area approached the tent (soup kitchen)," Marcie recalls, "we could see the women and children lined up with plastic bowls

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and spoons.... They would sing for us as we unloaded the car."

But the crowd got noticeably larger every week—in the range of hundreds. This tiny group of women, already struggling to keep up, realized that people were even keeping their kids home from school on that day of the week so they could get a meal. "The most painful memory," Marcie recalls, "is the day we also had a whole bunch of toothbrushes to distribute, a gift from a dentist in south Texas. Once again, we ran out of food. And here I was, this white American women standing there like a fool with only toothbrushes left to give—for teeth that had no food on them. I can't even describe what that felt like in the face of these hungry women and children. We just literally didn't have anything else to give them. All we could do is cry and pray, 'Help them, Lord; Lord, help us!'"

Through experiences like this, we found ourselves in the "fast-track" for learning to rely more and more on God for the grace to persevere in the service of love, letting go of attachment to results. When I make return trips, I sometimes see members of this dedicated but joyful group of women who continue to load up their cars every Friday morning with the biggest pots of soup they can concoct and to do what they can to show God's love. They know they are not overcoming the crisis of poverty in

Africa. But they are doing what they can. As Mother Theresa once said, "God calls us to be faithful, not successful."

## *Learning What Love Looks Like*

One of the most moving moments of our stay was witnessing the baptism of six orphaned children, ages 3-14, in St. Winfred's Methodist Church south of Durban on the Indian Ocean. All six children had been left homeless when their parents died of AIDS, a frequent event in the densely populated settlement of shacks and lean-tos. A 14-year old boy helped the children to survive and paid a tribal headman cruel rent for their hovel and water.

Mabel, a Zulu "Bible-woman" in the Black Methodist church tradition there, found them on one of her regular walks through the settlement in search of children in distress. She, with the support of the church, extracted the children from the clutches of their living hell and began finding homes for them in the neighborhood. Unbelievably, their baptismal certificates were the first and only documentation of these children's existence!

As pastor Don received each of them for baptism and lifted them to heaven, it was as though God was saying to each of them and every other abandoned child in the world, "You are my beloved child, precious in my sight. I want for you with all my heart a place to live and grow in grace." What we beheld that day was more than ritual: the love of Christ took on body and the word became flesh in the congregation's tangible commitment to the children's future and to a "ministry of protection" for the little ones of their community.

We spent the entire next day with Mabel, going around and seeing the ministries she and the church had created: rape counseling center, a work center for disabled adults, an orphanage in her tiny home for abandoned children. We saw how Jesus shows up, not only in people like Mabel who live love like they've got nothing to lose, but also in the congregation that wrapped its arms around those little children with a long term commitment to their restoration and well-being.

## *Believing in Social Miracles*

Again and again, people told us the miracle story of what happened in South Africa in 1994—average people, whites and blacks. This is a story we wanted to hear and we wanted our children to hear. It is a story that says anything is possible with God. It says we need not be victims to a conventional wisdom that defines strength of leadership only in terms of military prowess or understands our options in the face of fear in terms of violence and retribution.

When civil war seemed inevitable, when a violent revolution and overthrow of the white apartheid government seemed inevitable, when the Black majority were ready to pay back their white oppressors for decades of crimes against their humanity, Nelson Mandela called for forgiveness. As one couple put it, "Nelson Mandela himself had so many reasons not to forgive, to nurture hate and retribution. But instead he said 'Come, let's walk together.' To Blacks, he said, 'Forgive and move on.' To Whites he said, 'Don't leave; we need you.'"

In 1994, the country held its first free election, with likelihood of violence very high. Blacks and Whites, tribesmen and executives, domestic workers and professionals, poor and rich, all stood together in long lines at the polling places. People referenced the actual experience of standing in line together as a taste of a "New South Africa," a new kind of nation, the kind that Nelson Mandela was calling the people to labor together to build. When, against all predictions, the day unfolded peacefully, people tell of a kind national euphoria. They celebrated a new beginning under wise, courageous, and forgiving leadership. The title of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book about the "truth and reconciliation" process, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, says it all.

### *Bringing It Home—*

#### *"A Christ Healed America for the Healing of the Nations"*

We learned so much more than we could possibly tell here about South Africa, the church there, and about ourselves. We brought home a new awareness of our blindness to the racial dividedness that continues to exist in America right before our eyes. We came home resolved to be as intentional about seeing beneath the surface here and engaging populations

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"not like us" here as we were there. We came back with a passion for building partnerships between churches of the "haves" and "have nots," not only for the good of the "have nots," but for the salvation of the "haves"!

We also came back with a deep appreciation for the Methodists of southern Africa, their courageous and persevering role in their nation's ongoing transformation, and their vision—"A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of the Nations."

Could it be that God is speaking to us in America through the experiences of Africa? Could God be planting a seed in us, calling us similarly to a vision of "A Christ Healed America for the Healing of the Nations?" If so, that's a vision our family could give its life to. □

**Stephen Bryant is Editor/Publisher of The Upper Room and Associate General Secretary of the General Board of Discipleship.**