

South Africa Report for WCR and MWiB

Carolyn Lawrence February 2018

Introduction

Our visit to South Africa came about because as the British Officer for the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, I was offered a trip on behalf of the British Methodist Church at some point in my five year appointment.

I had begun to correspond with one of our Mission Partners, Rev Jane Day, and was interested particularly in the leadership programme for women she had instigated and the executive agreed this could be a useful connection and learning experience. The Methodist Women in Britain policy is for two people to travel together and so it was felt that this trip could be of benefit to Rachel Allison, our Helen Kim Memorial Scholar and she agreed to accompany me.

Jane lives in a place called Germiston which is close to Johannesburg. She and her husband Steve, very graciously allowed us to stay with them in their home and it was great to spend time with them and find out about their life in South Africa as well as learn about some of the issues facing them and the nation.



Women in Leadership

The main reason we were visiting South Africa was to find out about Magnify, the women in leadership programme, written and delivered by Rev Jane Day. The name for the programme takes inspiration from the song of Mary in Luke Chapter 1 when she says, 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant...the mighty one has done great things for me...holy is his name.'

The programme aims to equip, encourage and empower women to serve God wherever they are in God's mission and takes place on six Saturdays throughout the year. The six sessions, all beginning with 'C' are as follows:

- Context – Women in leadership
- Character – The inward journey
- Competence – What gifts do we bring?
- Connect – Who is around you?
- Communion – Exploring spirituality
- Courage – What are you aiming for?
- Celebration – Telling stories of changed lives

Rachel and I attended a 'Magnify' day exploring spirituality, which was held at a wonderful retreat centre called Enseni - a former family home that was bequeathed to the church and is set in beautiful gardens.



The theme of the day was 'love' and we were offered three different options to help us engage with the theme. One was creative – to decorate a compassion box and fill it with things that give us pleasure or enjoyment and reflect on how we take care of ourselves. The second was an awareness walk – we were invited to walk in the garden and really take time to notice the beauty of the nature around us and listen for God's voice. This was helped by the fact that it was summer in South Africa and it was a beautiful, hot, still, sunny day! The third invitation was to go to a quiet prayer room and focus on different aspects of God's heart, resting in his love for us.



After a couple of hours we gathered together again and shared Holy Communion and were invited to share any thoughts from the morning. We then ended the time together with lunch before everyone went their separate ways.



Jane very generously allowed Rachel and myself to look at all her Magnify resources and we were both impressed by the professionalism, careful thought and attention to detail that Jane has put into the planning of the days and by some of the amazing stories of women who have done the course and have been enabled to realise their worth to God and how he has gifted them, and gone on to do some amazing things in a leadership role. Another thing that was inspiring for us was that in a nation where there is still a lot of segregation and division, even sometimes in the churches, that the Magnify programme is pulling together women of all backgrounds, races and nationalities in a common bond of sisterhood that must surely put a smile on God's face.

Apartheid

One of the aspects of life in South Africa that is well known around the world is the years of apartheid and we were keen to find out more about this during our visit. We knew this would not be an easy thing to do but felt that it was important to learn some of the national history.

We visited the Apartheid Museum which was opened in 2001. The museum was developed as a way of telling the story of apartheid in all its complexity in a way that informed people about the history but also to bear witness to suffering, heroism and tragedy. It was also built in the hope it would serve as a warning of what happens when people believe in the superiority of one group of people over another. The museum took us on a dark and difficult journey that ended in hopefulness for the future.

At the ticket office we were randomly given tickets classifying us as either 'white' or 'non-white' and we had to enter through different gates allocated to our race group. Rachel had a 'white' ticket and mine was 'non-white' so I had to enter separately. In a very small way I experienced the uncertainty and vulnerability of being separated and wasn't sure if that meant I would be spending the day alone as it was not clear where and if we would meet up.



We saw many of the signs that were used during the apartheid years to keep the races separate in all aspects of life. Some of these shocking signs are below.



Apartheid was introduced in 1948 by the National Party who came to power in this year – they set about creating many laws that separated people in terms of race.

One aspect of the apartheid laws that held particular poignancy for me personally was the fact that mixed race relationships were punishable by imprisonment. Having a daughter who is married to a wonderful Nigerian man and a beautiful mixed race granddaughter I was appalled that any regime could be so narrow minded and unjust.

We learned that apartheid ended in 1994 with the first fully democratic elections in which Nelson Mandela was voted as President, followed by the creation of a new flag and a new constitution for the country based on equality, justice and freedom for all.

I was left reflecting on how appalling injustice like this can be allowed to take place but I remembered that this has happened time and again throughout history and even good and well-meaning people have stood by and allowed their fellow human beings to be treated in sub human ways – it still happens today where there is oppression of people around the world. It made me wonder if there are ways in which I am complicit in the oppression of others through my lifestyle or through keeping silent where I ought to speak out. I pray that if I am aware of the ill treatment of others I would have the courage to speak out, act in their defence and be prepared to change my way of life accordingly.

The museum ended with a feeling of hopefulness for the future and for the healing of hurts and division and gave me a fresh impetus to pray for this wonderful nation. I loved this quote that I read from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, ‘South Africa so utterly improbably is a beacon of hope in a dark and troubled world.’



Methodism in South Africa

During our visit, Rachel and I had the privilege of visiting the Connexional Office of the Methodist Church of South Africa where Rachel led the staff devotions.



After the morning prayers we were taken for coffee to a room in which there was an amazing exhibition telling the history of Methodism in South Africa.

I learned that Methodism in South Africa began as a result of lay Christian work by an Irish soldier of the English Regiment, John Irwin, who was stationed at the Cape and began to hold prayer meetings as early as 1795. This paved the way for missionary work from 1816 onwards and the establishment of mission stations along the Cape. The Methodist Church of South Africa formerly began in 1833 and gained independence from the British conference in 1926. Today there are reportedly 2 million members in the Methodist Church of South Africa.



The first black President of Conference was shockingly as recent as 1964 and the first female minister was ordained in 1976. Sadly, to date there has not yet been a female President of Conference so we will watch this space with interest for the future.

What saddened me here (and in other countries I have visited) is the way the churches seem to operate in a very ‘British’ way and don’t always reflect the culture within which they are placed. If you look at the photos below of one of the churches we visited, it is interesting that there is nothing to give it away that we were in Africa (other than maybe the palm trees!) – it could be a church anywhere in the UK.



The township churches definitely had a more African feel to them and even though the services were organised in a very ‘British’ style, when the congregations began to sing in worship, their passion and exuberance burst out and we felt that we were truly worshipping in a way that was natural to the people. We were in awe of Rev Steve Day who has worked hard to learn to speak in the language of the people and who on the day I was with him in the township church of Good Hope, led the entire liturgy in Xhosa. The local people are amazed that a British man has gone to the trouble of learning their language and he has earned a lot of respect for that.



From various countries I have visited it seems that congregations often feel that the ‘British’ way is the correct way to ‘do’ church and I have a sense that in the building of congregations, much of the original culture of the indigenous people has been lost. There is a colonial feel to a lot of our churches overseas and that makes me feel sad.

Ernest Cole in *House of Bondage*, writing in 1967 about the arrival of Christianity in South Africa states that 'The white missionaries, no matter how high their purpose, could not help but impose their own Western background onto African converts whose traditions and culture were far different.'

I know from various African Christians with whom I have spoken that many are grateful to the white man for bringing Jesus to them but often want to be free to worship in their own way rather than in a way imposed on them from Britain.

It seems that we have a long way to go within the church in releasing people from the religious traditions and culture of our way of doing church, so that they can be enabled to worship and run their churches in a way that is at one with their own culture and traditions.

Again Ernest Cole in *House of Bondage* writes, 'The Africans learned from white example that Christianity can be treated as little more than a religious social club, something to join because it is somehow better to be inside than outside but not something to affect ones everyday life deeply.' How I pray that the African church will be able to hold on to Jesus and not allow dead religion to squash their faith and passion for God.

The other thing we learned about the churches from our visit is that there is still a lot of segregation within the church with different groups for blacks, whites and coloureds and there is still a lot of prayer needed for the healing of old wounds and bringing about unity so that the church of Jesus can be an example to the rest of society in reconciliation and fellowship.

As I mentioned, the Magnify programme, run by Jane, seeks to do just that as it brings together women from across the cultural and racial divides in a common sisterhood and that is a powerful, prophetic statement in this country and a lesson in unity to all of us wherever people are excluded or separated.

I close with the words of a song from the song book at the Connexional Office which is a prayer for the nation of South Africa:

Who will save our land and people?

Who can rescue us from wrong?

We are lost – faint, false and foolish

We have slighted God too long.

Save the people, Lord our Saviour,

Guide us home from country far

Holy fire consume our rancours;

Thy Kingdom come – in Africa.

It has been a great privilege and honour to be enabled to visit Steve and Jane and find out more about their lives and ministry and to learn about the nation of South Africa and its issues and I am immensely grateful to have been given this opportunity. I pray as I follow up from this visit, that I will be able to enable others to gain an insight into this part of God's church and to inspire them to pray for South Africa and indeed our sister churches across the world.

Pray for South Africa (some of this is based on information from Operation World)

- New President Cyril Ramaphosa – that he will deal with corruption in the Government and lead with integrity and wisdom.
- High crime rates fuelled by poverty, desperation, lack of justice and illegal firearms – pray for the police, those working with children and young people at risk, the jobless, prisoners and the hopeless and desperate.
- Continued legacy of apartheid – inequality, poverty, racism.
- For the church to lead the way in unity and reconciliation.
- The nation is 75% Christian so pray that the believers will unite to seek to address injustice and poverty.
- Pray for healing and unity – especially where some Christians were seen as slow to denounce apartheid and divisions remain.
- Pray for the refugees and migrants living in or travelling through South Africa and those who seek to help them.

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