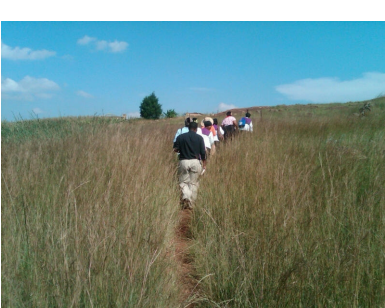


From The Bishop - March 30, 2011

I am sitting in the office of Suzanne Peterson in Bishopscourt, the residence and offices of the Archbishop of Cape Town. Because of our companion relationship with the Diocese of Swaziland, we pray every day, of course, for the Primate of the Southern Africa province. So there are no strangers here. Suzanne was the first female priest ordained in Iowa in 1977 serving principally at St Paul's, Des Moines. For many years, however, she has ministered in South Africa and is currently, as you may know, the Public Policy Officer for the Archbishop. As I wait she is busy polishing off a letter to the Mayor of Cape Town in response to a dreadfully tragic fire which killed three adults and six children, all Anglicans. It seems to have been a tragedy that could possibly have been avoided.

Back in Swaziland, there are many such tragedies that could be avoided. And the Church seeks to be as vigilant as it can. This past week my donated truck became a taxi as I drove a truck bed load of Mothers' Union members along the "off-road" roads up into the mountains around four parishes. Along with their priests they bring Church to those who because of infirmity or the terminal prognosis of AIDS, can no longer come to Church. Some people were not Anglicans, but were fortunate to be neighbors to Anglicans and so were given a visit. We are greeted by the caregiver – sometimes a young teenage daughter, often the mother or wife; we enter into the home to sit on the mats spread out on the floor, sometimes in a darkened space blackened by the aftermath of an open cooking and warming wood fire; and suddenly transform the place with lively praise. I have decided that African singing is itself a fractal. Whether you are listening to a huge choir or to a dozen members of the Mothers' Union or even a couple of parishioners sharing reserved communion with an elderly parishioner, the sound is the same – just as soaring and as transcendent.



After prayer they turn to me to offer a word of encouragement from Scripture, or they invite me to say something to lead into the home communion. Our time together ends with the extensive expressions of gratitude to and by all concerned, and we set off to the next place. From the solemnity and compassion of the encounter, there is a shift to playfulness as the women (some in their mid-seventies) bounce around in the back of the truck. I am just astonished that they can climb up into the truck over the wheel with such deftness. At times the truck gets stuck or we have to find innovative ways of making a three point turn. There is the occasional hitchhiker who piles in with the women. It all adds to the experience of the day. One day the Church Warden would be phoning around as we traveled, finding others to whom we should go. The priest expressed gratitude that the sun goes down at nights, fearing that there was no limit to the warden's passion.

This was no special outing because I was with them, but a weekly or bi-weekly event for which they were happy to have me tag along. It made the gathering on Sunday all that special, though, as we were able to announce our trek during the week. At the parish of St Matthias in Ezulweni, I noticed the large number of young people and mentioned that they seemed too old to come for the children's blessing, but not old enough to have been confirmed and therefore receive Communion. They responded by coming out for their own blessing. They then honored us all with a mini Gospel concert they had prepared for the day.

After my brief respite in Cape Town, for the next ten days I head to the South and then to the East of Swaziland, culminating in the [celebration of the dedication of the new building in Mpaka](#) which has been well supported by the people of Iowa. It is not an easy time in the Diocese of Swaziland nor in the country. One segment of the population talks about an "uprising" announced for April 12th. I am not sure that one actually announces dates for uprisings. I would imagine they best happen unannounced! And as you may expect, the Army and police have also announced that they are ready! I might stay indoors and let the day play itself out, but your ongoing prayers would be appreciated for everyone, especially Bishop Meshack.

Generally this is a peace-loving and hospitable people. In one homestead, a grown daughter who was looking after her aged mother after she had lost three brothers to AIDS, went away after communion to return with a magnificent lettuce. She insisted that I take it to my host even though I understood that it was her last remaining lettuce in the garden! These are experiences that haunt you and humbly direct you to deeper prayer. It is unforgettable, and barely describable.

This intensity has been relieved a little with the four-day visit to Cape Town to see Suzanne and the Archbishop Thabo Makgoba. I was able to visit [Robben Island](#) and see where Mandela spent 18 years of his 27 in prison. As Suzanne says, it is remarkable how anyone can walk out of such a place and decide to lead people to a place of reconciliation, to decide that enough suffering has already occurred and there is no reason to perpetuate it out of any spirit of revenge. That is a miracle of grace made even clearer when you see the limestone quarry where daily work damaged his eye sight, or the three by two paces which marked his and all of the prisoners living and sleeping quarters.

The guides at the prison are themselves former political prisoners. They spoke in the first person of their experiences. Each of them thanked us as members of the global community for helping to bring their freedom! In the famous words of Desmond Tutu memorialized in the plaza where the four South African Nobel Peace Prize winners are honored: "A person is a person through other people."

I can already feel that these next few weeks are going to require a delicate balance of emotion, as I continue to walk alongside the Swazi Anglicans in ministry and yet grow in eager anticipation of my return among you. It is my prayer that the Spirit who has been doing a good work in us all will in the days ahead direct and uphold us in the service of Christ. +Alan