

Trip Participants Experience Life In Its Fullness

By PAUL BUTLER

November 1, 2008

God is identified with the weak, the poor, and the powerless. Jesus was clear when he said people will experience God when they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and minister to the sick.

Many are saying God is using the current problems of South Africa - extreme poverty, an out-of-control AIDS pandemic, and deep cultural and racial tensions - to again reveal himself and to remind people what the Kingdom is really about. Eight Bay area residents who visited the country for a week in late September were privileged to experience Jesus' promise that when caring for others "we may have life and have it to the full."

Our group included a teacher, graduate student, two lawyers, a pastor, a Pinellas Circuit Court judge and two homemakers. Our mission was to reach out to about 100 AIDS orphans and vulnerable children at the Manaleni Care Center.

Manaleni is in KwaMhlanga, population 500,000, where nearly half of the residents are HIV positive or suffering from AIDS. Until 1994, under the apartheid regime, it had served as a "homeland," or reservation, for black South Africans. They could not leave without a permit. Although only 50 miles northeast of Pretoria, from a cultural and economic perspective KwaMhlanga might as well be 500 miles from the South African capital.

We kept connected to America via our BlackBerrys, which told us daily of the financial meltdown back home. Some of us lamented the decimation of our retirement assets. Others wondered about their jobs. Then we looked around. A visit to KwaMhlanga places a lot in perspective. The poverty in which these people live is beyond description. There's nothing like a reality check.

Bonding With The Orphans

The relationship with Manaleni and Mukhanyo Ministries began after a visit to KwaMhlanga by members of the St. James United Methodist Church in New Tampa. In February 2007, the team observed four vibrant centers, each caring for about 100 AIDS orphans by providing food, clothes, school uniforms, tutoring, recreation and love.

Each center also has a program that reaches out to the community. Home care workers visit and identify people in desperate need of food, as well as people dying alone or a parent dying with small children in the house. Mukhanyo Ministries also operates Nakekela, a palliative care center for patients that combines medical treatment and the promise of God's love during their final days. A foster care program in each location then works to place orphaned children with a caregiver, often an older "granny."

During last year's visit, the St. James team asked the leaders of Mukhanyo Ministries about a fifth center that was vacant. When told they had run out of money, the St. James team resolved to raise the support needed to open the center. An HIV/AIDS Ministry was started at St. James with a local and an international focus. Funds collected from the St. James congregation and in the Tampa community made a difference: The Manaleni Center opened in June 2007. Since then, the team has made three other visits to the region.

The St. James congregation wanted to do more than just keep the doors open at Manaleni. We wanted to establish a relationship with the orphans. Last month, we realized we had accomplished just that. Children approached us upon our arrival, asking about team members who had been there a year earlier: "Where's Jennifer? Where's Julie? Where's Tyler? Where's Robin?" And the heartstrings tugged when two orphaned teens said "Where's Carli? We call her Mom." This was life in all its fullness.

We also issued a challenge to the white Afrikaner congregation in Pretoria to partner with St. James in ministry to the children at Manaleni. In September, both congregations made field trips to the Pretoria Zoo with the younger children and to a theme park with the older ones. For nearly all of the children, this was the first time they had been outside their desolate, poverty-stricken environment. Surely, the reward of their smiles and laughter was what Jesus had in mind.

Last year's team visited a family of 14 whose "house" consisted of a one-room corrugated aluminum shanty, about 9 feet by 14 feet. That's not uncommon in the area. Working through a missionary from California serving at Mukhanyo, the St. James ministry built and furnished a four-room house for the family and bought

school uniforms for the children. After September's team visited the Nyembe family, they brought back letters from the parents and the children, each note a precious gift. The mother wrote: "My life has changed into a normal one. I even dream nicely." A child wrote: "We can now go to school because of you...I'm very happy because I know that at last I have a HOME." Another penned: "I'm very happy that you made us human beings today....May God bless you."

Jesus was right. It is in giving that you truly receive. And what we received was, indeed, life in all its fullness.

Every time a team visits the Nakekela hospice, it's like stepping into a sanctuary. This is considered holy ground, but not because there is the threat of imminent death. Instead, one feels the very presence of a living God moving and acting in the nurses and the workers as they sing to and lovingly touch their patients while providing medicine for the bodies and hope for the souls entrusted to their care. And so we witnessed Jesus' words become incarnate: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these ... you do for me."

Using Africa To Reveal Himself

Albert Schweitzer was a gifted musician, composer, world-renowned organist and university professor. He also was a theologian and a medical doctor. He had unlimited opportunities and could have done anything, but he chose to serve most of his life in Africa. I think I now know why. I believe that God has been using Africa for some time to reveal Himself. At the end of Schweitzer's most famous book, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," Schweitzer concludes that there is really only one way to discover the real Jesus of history:

"... He commands. And to those who hearken to him, whether wise or unwise, he will reveal himself in the peace, the labours, the conflicts and the suffering that they may experience in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery they will learn who he is."

In South Africa we understood what Schweitzer wrote. We experienced a bit of why this recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace utilized his gifts in a continent still so desperately in need. And in so doing, at least for a week in September, eight from the Tampa Bay area experienced life in all its fullness.

The Rev. Paul Butler is chancellor of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church and can be reached at pb@tampabay.rr.com. Learn more about Manaleni and the St. James HIV/AIDS ministry by visiting www.HIVAIDSministry.com. Faith Matters is an occasional feature of reader-submitted essays on how an experience changed one's life in regard to faith. For more information on how to publish a personal story, contact Michelle Bearden at mbearden@tampatrib.com or (813