

Sizwe

-South African News-

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Personal Stuff

If you're ever in Thailand, find a resort called Hat Kaew near Hat Yai; sleep in a bungalow for next to nothing a night; and drink cocktails from a hollowed-out pineapple next to the pool by moonlight. Wonderful!! ... Oh, it's better if you have a wife with you too!

We had three very peaceful days there in the middle of a very tiring schedule which crammed exams, a youth camp, four continents, 100 hours travelling, three weddings (one being our own), and a week-long conference into three months.

Since then we have been busy figuring out what it means to be married and rearranging our lives so that they mesh together. That's one of my excuses for not getting this Newsletter together earlier, and I have a long list other excuses which is available on request!

Tragedy and Hope

History continues to unravel itself at a reckless speed in South Africa and we seem swept along with it, not really knowing where to lay anchor. The Referendum was big news, and more recently the UN involvement - both very significant signs of hope, yet violence and fear still grow.

In the Referendum 68% of white South Africans voters supported de Klerk's reform process. Before the Referendum it was not at all clear which way the voting would go and so it was quite a relief to see such a definite Yes vote. Nevertheless, I find it distressing that 32% must still prefer the Apartheid policy to democracy and equality.

An African family has moved in next door to us: one of a growing number who prefer to pay extravagant rent in the city rather than live in the homes they own in the violent townships. The

grandchildren visit on weekends and holidays and often spend time with us. Five of them come to splash water over our car, scribble on paper, make chocolate cake and dance to our records. So even in such sad circumstances, there is joy and hope.

The number of African families which supported by the grandparents is nothing short of staggering. A program which assists 350 primary school children found that for 60 families the sole income was from grand-parents and for 26 others the sole income came from great-grandparents! In most cases this would mean that in a family of maybe ten people, no-one can find work and so the family's survival depends on the grandparents' pension.

Apartheid - what is left?

I wonder how the politics and conflicts in South Africa are now seen from Australia. Does it seem unaccountably strange that the government can boast that 'Apartheid is dead' and yet the black majority still feel oppressed? What has actually changed in the past two years and what still remains of Apartheid?

It should be noted that the core of Apartheid was designed to keep people of different races in separate worlds. The Population Registration Act required that all people were branded with a racial group at birth. The Public Amenities Act minimised the extent to which people of different races could interact in public. The Group Areas Act forced races to live geographically separated (and allocated only 13% of the land to blacks, even though they make up 75% of the population). The Immorality Act (an amazing name!) prevented racially mixed marriages.

These are examples of legislation whose primary purpose was to separate rather

than oppress. All of them have been repealed and so it can rightly be said that the 'pillars of Grand Apartheid have been removed'.

But other legislation was more directly designed to oppress the non-whites and increase the affluence and power of the whites. For instance the Job Reservation Act (now also abolished) defined which race groups could occupy which job categories; the Internal Security Act (now modified, yet still problematic) gave police outrageous powers to detain people without trial; the State used the Defence Forces against their own black citizens; and the education system for non-whites was always kept inferior to that for whites.

So what remains after de Klerk's reforms?

1. Voting

First and foremost is the lack of voting rights for blacks. The call for the right to vote is the major demand of all the black liberation groups.

In 1984 the parliamentary system of South Africa changed from a whites-only governing body to a Tri-cameral system. Now there are three (largely autonomous) governing bodies at national level - the House of Representatives (for the so-called coloureds), the House of Assembly (for whites) and the House of Delegates (for Indians). This nicely gave coloureds and Indians the right to vote without actually giving them much power. But blacks still have neither voting rights nor power.

(One must remember that 'coloureds' are a separate racial group which is quite distinct from 'black'.)

2. Education

Although the de Klerk government is attempting to upgrade black education, the task is almost hopeless. There are

still 13 different education departments and it will take quite some time to reorganise the bureaucracy non-rationally. Equal opportunity in education is a wonderful goal but hardly achievable given economic constraints.

There seems to be broad agreement that primary education needs the most help, probably at the expense of higher education. The country needs a broad-based, low-cost program of basic literacy, numeracy and health skills. (Guess where that leaves me? Imagine me as a primary teacher!)

3. Social attitudes

Of course, no amount of changing legislation can force people to change their attitudes. With the best will and the best leaders in the world the biggest long-term problem remains: how to change the human heart.

The attitudes which supported Apartheid and the attitudes it fostered will haunt the country for decades. White right-wing violence may well equal the current black violence; personal hatred, revenge, racism, blindness and evil will be around for a long time.

Empowering for Reconciliation with Justice

“ERJ is a network of Christian trainers, educators and enablers who seek to

empower South Africans to heal broken relationships and work for the establishment of justice, reconciliation and peace” (so says our newly designed Mission Statement).

During February we convened our first national conference - a consultation and training event attended by 120 people from a broad cross-section of South Africa’s racial and political mix. Over six days we discussed the current state of the nation and how the church should see its role; worked through a series of case studies reflecting actual conflicts in SA; and learnt about mediation, negotiation and peacemaking through workshops aimed at developing practical skills.

It was a remarkable success. Participants returned home confident that the skills they had learnt would be immediately applicable. Maybe more importantly, they returned home with more enthusiasm, knowing that they were not alone in their struggle for peace.

You probably heard about the massacre at Boipatong where Inkatha supporters attacked an ANC suburb. Two people on the spot had attended the ERJ conference and claim that the skills they had learnt enabled them to prevent an even bigger retaliatory attack by the ANC supporters. (I have heard through a reliable source that the attack was triggered by anger against an ANC man who was having an affair with an Inkatha woman. The political affiliations were actually secondary.)

Over the next three years we have funding for a whole series of regional and local training events. Several of these are already organised and there seems to be a great demand for more. This is hopeful - it shows that people throughout the country truly wish for a just peace and are realising their need for peacemaking skills.

A Uniquely Christian Offering

Being firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, ERJ has a unique perspective to offer South Africa. The New Testament declares the possibility of forgiveness and molds an understanding of reconciliation around that possibility. It is hard to see how reconciliation could be possible without forgiveness, yet no other ideology presents an adequate theory of forgiveness.

It greatly encourages me that such an initiative comes from the Church. Even though the Church is divided on political issues, it still has a major part to play in leading the country forward. Last year key church leaders managed to gather the main political protagonists together and facilitated the National Peace Accord. Nobody else could have done it, and neither could any one church leader, but together the church leaders form the only group with any credibility as peacemakers.