

South Africa: Global Witness Experience

Understanding racial reconciliation

“The problem of intolerance must be confronted in all its forms: wherever any minority is persecuted and marginalized because of its religious convictions or ethnic identity, the well-being of society as a whole is endangered and each one of us must feel affected.”

— Pope Francis
Simon Wiesenthal Center, October 2013



BY KIMBERLY VRUDNY

On JUNE 16, 1976, more than 10,000 school children planned to march between two schools in the southwestern townships (Soweto) outside of Johannesburg. They protested the passage of a law that would require all instruction in secondary schools to take place in Afrikaans — the language of the Dutch settlers who had taken control of the government beginning in 1948. Because students’ first language in the region was predominantly Zulu, and because the white government’s control of the African population was growing more and more intense, the children said “enough is enough.” Police learned of the march and opened fire, killing as many as 176 children on that day including Hector Pieterse, who was thirteen years old when he died. Sam Nzima captured the scene on film. The photograph was banned in South Africa, but it appeared in England and in *The New York Times* in the United States, increasing the world’s awareness of the brutality of the apartheid government.

Still, it would take more than twenty years after the so-called “Soweto Uprising”

for the government to fail. Social unrest in South Africa, combined with international economic pressure, eventually pushed the government’s hand. Prime Minister F. W. de Klerk, the last prime minister under apartheid, agreed to a policy of “one man/one vote” and released Nelson Mandela from his prison sentence, of which he had served 27 years. In 1994, the African National Congress (ANC), with Mandela at the head of the ticket, became South Africa’s first democratically elected government.

For sixteen days in January 2018, a group of fifteen parishioners (and one friend) from The Basilica of Saint Mary traveled to Johannesburg and Cape Town on a global witness trip, hoping to bring insights from South Africa’s experience of racial reconciliation back to the Twin Cities to inform anti-racism work in our own context. Led by South African Anglican priest Richard Cogill and University of St. Thomas professor of systematic theology Kimberly Vrudny, the group listened to a number of reflections by leaders in the church, academia, and non-governmental organization (NGO) sectors. They wrestled

PHOTOS / KIMBERLY VRUDNY



(Above) The Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, South Africa, commemorates the “Great Trek” of the Afrikaners (Dutch settlers) to establish a republic in South Africa independent from British rule. For some, it is viewed as a monument to oppression. (Left) Nelson Mandela’s prison cell visited by The Basilica’s global witness group.

sincerely with issues affecting racial reconciliation as South Africa approaches the 25th anniversary of its first democratic election. Several themes recurred throughout our time in South Africa, among them memory, restitution, and forgiveness.

MEMORY

After World War II, the German Catholic theologian Johannes Baptist Metz spoke of “dangerous memories.” These are the memories of the victims (or, in some cases, the survivors of history) whose voices interrupt the narratives of people in power and give hope for the transformation of society. Their voices imagine a better way to be human through a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources.

The group heard South Africans give voice to the dangerous memories of the past and walked away with a heightened awareness of the complexities of shaping a post-conflict society. It was clear that in

South Africa, like elsewhere, there is not a single story. History itself is contested by multiple perspectives. The Voortrekker Monument outside of Johannesburg is a good example thereof. This towering monument commemorates the “Great Trek” the Afrikaners (Dutch settlers) took to establish a republic independent from Britain’s colonizing rule. Some white descendants of those trekkers might celebrate this monument as a memorial to those who were brutalized by the British. Other white descendants might recognize it as a monument to white power and oppression of the indigenous Zulu population.

The speakers shared the complex history of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a court-like restorative justice body assembled in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid in 1994. The group recognized the trauma in their voices — the TRC Commissioner who shared her experience of being tortured at the hands of

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Imago Dei (Image of God)

The election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 ended legalized segregation or “apartheid” in South Africa. The new president appointed a commission to help the nation acknowledge the pain of its past so that it could move confidently into the future.

Led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered amnesty under certain conditions to police, security officers, and citizens in exchange for truth about the crimes they had committed under apartheid. Upon hearing these confessions, some victims and their families extended forgiveness; others could not bring themselves to do so, at least not under the glare of the spotlight. With highlights broadcast throughout the nation on television and radio each night, 27,000 cases of gross human rights abuses were heard over a three-year period.

As we continue to grapple in the United States with issues of racial conflict and ongoing allegations of police brutality disproportionately affecting people of color, The Basilica has established a task force called Imago Dei (Image of God) Initiative for Racial Reconciliation. In the coming months, this group will announce prayer services, educational programs, engagement opportunities, and advocacy opportunities to draw the congregation into the work of restoring right relations between God’s children of all shades and hues.

One of the group’s first initiatives was to gather sixteen members and friends of The Basilica of Saint Mary to travel to Johannesburg and Cape Town in January to examine South Africa’s experience with racial reconciliation and to bring home some lessons to inform our work in the local context.

Imago Dei (Image of God)

To learn more about Imago Dei: Initiative for Racial Reconciliation visit www.mary.org/racialreconciliation.

apartheid's security police and an activist priest who received a mail bomb from the apartheid regime. They are still struggling for healing.

After the trip, Janice Andersen, Director of Christian Life at The Basilica, reflected that she was inspired by "the willingness of the people of South Africa to open the wounds of the past, name them, grieve them, and seek to heal." These encounters and questions will inform The Basilica's own initiatives for racial justice in Minnesota.

RESTITUTION

The process of making reparation or compensating in some way for losses incurred in the past is similarly a complicated issue, as the group learned anew in South Africa. In 1950, the apartheid government passed a law called the "Group Areas Act" that made it illegal for people of European, Indian, and African ancestry to live in integrated neighborhoods. Rather, segregation and "separate development" was legalized, mandated, and enforced. The most valuable property was claimed for whites, while black and "colored" (the term referring to people of mixed race) townships were created for the majority of the population. People of color were forcibly removed from their homes and were escorted to their new government-issued housing which was built on the most barren and infertile land. This resulted in the concentration of poverty with its attending issues of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, gang activity, and eventually the spread of disease, including HIV/AIDS, outside of every city, large and small, throughout South Africa.

How is restitution to be made for these compounded injustices? Parliamentarians are currently debating land reclamation and reform schemes to distribute land again more equitably — but does this



PHOTO / KIMBERLY VRUDNY

mean that land will once again be forcibly taken from one and given to another? Are there other options? Travelers met with the Chief Operating Officer of the Restitution Foundation, an organization which invites South Africans to dialogue about these difficult issues.

Upon returning home, participant Susan McGuigan wrote, "Even though I was alive and even an adult during much of apartheid, I feel like I knew very little about it. My eyes were opened to the suffering and injustice that took place during that time and still takes place. But the connections between South Africa and the United States cannot be overlooked." The group discerned if our parish could foster the same kind of dialogue in the Twin Cities to improve relations in our city?

FORGIVENESS

A philosophy of *ubuntu* tends to underscore African thought. *Ubuntu* means, "I am because you are." It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings. Whereas the Western understanding of forgiveness may be a one-time act including an apology that entails both forgetting the violation ("to forgive is to forget") as well as an immediate reconciliation with the wrongdoer, and African understanding of forgiveness is a reclamation of one's own power.

To wait for an apology is to hand power over to the wrongdoer; instead, forgiveness, even before an apology, enables one to refuse to become like the perpetrator. "I forgive because I refuse to allow you to have power over me." Rather than a one-time act, in Africa forgiveness can be understood more as a spiritual practice. When anger bubbles up, as is natural after a violation occurs, forgiveness is the practice of letting go (even 70 x 7 times). It is a spiritual practice of refusing to allow

(Above) The Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto, South Africa, commemorates the site where photographer Sam Nzima captured police brutality on film. Hector Pieterse was only thirteen years old when he was killed during the "Soweto Uprising."

Reflections from the Trip Participants

the anger and resentment to overpower and change the survivor into a monster who then becomes like the perpetrator by seeking vengeance which only continues the violent cycle.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu taught that to forgive does not mean to forget — nor does it entail immediate reconciliation. While forgiveness may be the first step towards reconciliation by opening a place of safety wherein a violator might offer an apology, reconciliation will require the re-establishment of trust through what can be a slow, arduous, and fraught process to restore right relations. Together, forgiveness and reconciliation constitute a restored relationship, which is ultimately the goal of a communal society. ✚

Kimberly Vrudny is an associate professor of systematic theology at the University of St. Thomas.

I learned to believe in my own goodness and in the power of forgiveness because it was reflected back to me in not only the fellow sojourners, but in everyone I met.

I am not an activist nor social worker, lawyer nor a doctor, but I am an educator and I can share what I learned by being courageous, speaking truth, and honoring all human beings.

— *Tricia Burns*

We have been successfully shocked, stimulated, and mildly culturally immersed. Now it is time to do our part.

— *John Leonard*

I have learned that I don't really need to go across the world to work for peace, justice, and reconciliation; I don't need to look any further than my own backyard. I think my challenge is to use what I have learned to make me a better person and my community a more loving and just place to live.

— *Susan McGuigan*

I was inspired by the tenacity and dedication of all those we met—from politicians to artists to community workers to theologians — in their focus toward the common good.

— *Carol Frenning*

The people of South Africa, particularly those of “color,” who, despite the crimes of humanity committed against them and the economic continuation of apartheid to the present, were committed... to the education of a white, entitled, male, American. It demonstrated to me that change is possible when I am willing to acknowledge my entitlement as a first step and follow up with small but continuous change in my own daily life.

— *John Quinn*

The South Africa post-apartheid truth and reconciliation journey challenged me to reflect beyond familiar cultural comforts and political viewpoints. Hearing personal wisdom stories from people close to the apartheid history taught me about global ramifications from white privilege. One speaker inspired me to develop a ‘wreak less’ attitude and to walk forward in promotion of equality and justice. I embrace the African concept of *ubuntu* (humanity to others) with prayer for a better global tomorrow.

— *Linda Atwood*

Basilica trip participants traveled to Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa on a global witness trip for sixteen days in January 2018.

