



Into Africa: a mission partner reflects

Stephen Day

THE REVD DR STEPHEN DAY is a mission partner with The Methodist Church in Britain, serving with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa as minister of Germiston Central Methodist Church, South Africa.

revstephenday2001@gmail.com
Germiston, RSA

In July 2013 the Revd Dr Stephen and the Revd Jane Day were accepted as mission partners with The Methodist Church in Britain. They are now based in the city of Germiston, south east of Johannesburg, South Africa. In this article Stephen reflects upon the time of transition from appointment as mission partners, to preparing to leave the UK and their arrival in South Africa. Stephen also reflects upon the ongoing issues and challenges which he and Jane face as they adjust to life in South Africa and their new roles.

CROSS-CULTURAL • DIVERSITY • FORGIVENESS • METHODIST CHURCH IN BRITAIN • METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA • MINISTRY • MISSION • RECONCILIATION • SOUTH AFRICA • TRANSITION

Introduction

I first visited South Africa in July 2000 on a month's placement to the Jabavu circuit in Soweto while an ordinand in The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB). It will not take too much imagination to envisage the enormous culture shock I experienced moving from the comfort of life in a theological college in Cambridge, UK, to living in a theological college in Soweto and ministering in a township setting. It was a fantastic experience from which I carry many vivid memories. Little did I realise that I would return to South Africa 14 years later.

Acceptance as a mission partner

In July 2013 my wife Jane (who is a Baptist minister) and I were both accepted as mission partners with the MCB. At that point we had no idea where in the world we would serve, but we were content that we would willingly go wherever God called us. Later that year we were invited to visit the East Rand, an area to the south east of Johannesburg, to explore potential placements. In November 2013 we visited the East Rand and were able to meet with colleagues and see a number of potential contexts in which we might serve. We returned to the UK with a sense that we and our colleagues in The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) saw roles for us in the East Rand, even though they needed to be discerned from the various opportunities.

Germiston

In mid-2014 we discovered that becoming the minister of Germiston Central Methodist Church¹ was the appropriate role for me, with Jane working in gender justice with the MCSA; we were happy to accept these roles. It felt strange accepting the invitation to minister at Germiston, having not met any of the members or leadership of the church. While we produced a short introduction for members of the church, nothing was forthcoming from Germiston about the nature of the church or its vision. All I knew about the church before our arrival was that there were three very different congregations worshipping in the same building, but together they comprised the one society. The majority of the members are Zimbabwean Shona speakers, with an English-speaking service in the morning and a vernacular service (predominantly Xhosa and Sotho speakers) in the afternoon. Thus, I was aware

of the significant cultural diversity within the society, but beyond that the church was a mystery to me.

Entering transition

It is hard to know when exactly Jane and I entered into our period of transition. We began to sense a shift in our thinking as we became aware that we were called to serve in another part of the world. However, this became more tangible when we knew that we would be based in Germiston.

Even before we knew that we were called to Germiston we began to make decisions about which of our possessions to take with us, which to place in storage, and which to sell. We were only able to ship possessions occupying an area of 3.4 cubic metres, which meant that we were forced to make tough choices about what we could take. While we were given a generous allowance to cover storage and resettlement costs, this only allowed us to rent a small storage unit (50 square metres). This reality meant that we needed to sell most of our possessions. In sifting through our possessions we recognised that the value we attributed to things had little to do with their monetary value and more to do with their emotional and sentimental value. We experienced a certain sense of freedom in being able to divest ourselves of things which ultimately we found we didn't want or need, but were aware of the consequences of the decisions we took since things we sold couldn't be retrieved. Having put some things in storage and others in boxes to be shipped to South Africa, we were left with a few suitcases and boxes: everything that would accompany us for the next six months!

We left Huddersfield in early August 2014 with everything packed in our Ford Fiesta. At that point we knew beyond any doubt that we were in transition. We had nowhere that we could call home, which enabled us in some way to identify with Jesus (Lk 9:58), although Jesus may not have had to wrestle with providing a residential address for banks and other organisations in his wandering! Having nowhere to call home, even though only for six weeks, felt very strange, especially having ministered alongside homeless people in Huddersfield while minister of Huddersfield Mission (2011–2014). Thus, I gained a different retrospective perspective on this ministry and became aware of how fortunate Jane and I were to have a strong support network of family and friends. I began to appreciate the enormous challenges facing those who are homeless with no support network. While we had to take our things with

us wherever we went, in common with those who are homeless, we had the benefit of a car to transport them, as well as secure homes in which they could be left overnight.

Our period of 'homelessness' was spent visiting family and friends throughout England and Wales. We planned to see as many people as possible in order to begin saying goodbye before we left the country. This felt important to us intuitively, in preparing ourselves and others for leaving. What we hadn't anticipated was the restlessness we felt as we began to settle for a few nights in one place, only then to pack up to move on again. We also hadn't anticipated the enormous energy needed to have similar conversations with people in each place we visited. It was lovely to talk with people who were interested in where we were going and what we would be doing, but it became draining to face the same questions again and again. We began to become detached from the answers we were giving, having become so accustomed to the questions. It was very difficult to live with other people's anxiety for us and our future. People were anxious to know about practical matters, such as security and healthcare. These were good questions, but we had no real understanding of what we would face in South Africa. While we were content to live with this uncertainty, many of our family and friends were not. We were conscious that as we said 'We don't know' in response to many questions we began to wonder if we should know an answer, which made us uncomfortable.

Training and preparation

Our 'homeless' period ended in mid-September 2014, when we moved to All Nations Christian College in Hertfordshire, UK. Prospective mission partners with the MCB are sent to do the En Route course run by All Nations. Our course included the Leoni family, who are now serving in Rwanda as mission partners with the MCB. En Route is a 10-week course to prepare people for cross-cultural ministry.² The 20 participants were culturally diverse, drawn from countries such as Denmark, Hong Kong, Japan, the Netherlands and Nigeria; this diversity was also replicated among the other students at All Nations. Dr Ruth Wall, the course leader, emphasised that we would not be able to engage in cross-cultural ministry elsewhere in the world if we could not do so at All Nations. The truth of her words were borne out during our time at the college. We began to appreciate the way in which we looked at the world through our cultural lenses, which are not necessarily shared by other people. I particularly valued

my engagement with Daniel Aghanenu, a Nigerian pastor, who helped me to reflect more deeply in preparation for living and ministering in Africa.

Our time at All Nations was a precious gift in many senses. It gave us space to reflect upon the practice of cross-cultural ministry, both at All Nations as well as in Germiston. I enjoyed having space to reread books that had been especially formative in my Christian journey, such as *The Prophetic Imagination* (Brueggemann 1978), *No Future without Forgiveness* (Tutu 1999) and *Resurrection* (Williams 2002).

The principal gift of the course was the opportunity to do a piece of research about the context that each participant was entering. My theme was 'Forgiveness, reconciliation and living the new calling'. I reflected upon the legacy of apartheid 20 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa. I was able to read a number of books, such as *A Rumour of Spring* (Du Preez 2013) and *After Freedom* (Newman and De Lannoy 2014), which revealed the way in which the legacy of apartheid continues to affect and, in many cases, limit the opportunities open to people in South Africa. It was in that context that I reflected upon forgiveness and reconciliation as vital elements of ministry in Germiston, especially in the context of cultural diversity found in the members of Germiston Central Methodist Church. In addition, there is a history of xenophobia within South Africa's recent past, which was likely to be shaping reality for the Zimbabwean members of the church.

I reflected upon the way in which, under pressure, in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (Jn 18:15–18, 25–27), and related this incident to the different responses of the Church in South Africa to the reality of apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Church actively supported apartheid, the South African Council of Churches led the struggle against apartheid, bringing together black leaders from various Churches, and the Methodist Church opposed apartheid, but was slow to address its internal racial discrimination. By contrast, I looked at the encounter of the risen Jesus with Peter on the beach in which he was forgiven, reinstated and received a new vocation (Jn 21:1–17), relating it to Brueggemann's (2014) discernment of reality, grief and hope as urgent prophetic tasks for the Church today. Jesus forgave and reinstated Peter by reminding him of the painful reality of his denial, but showing that the bond of love remained, symbolised in the gift of a new vocation. It struck me that there is still a need for people in South Africa to recognise how the reality of the apartheid regime impacted upon all people's lives, and to grieve for the ways in which all people were dehumanised.

Brueggemann suggests that it is through this process of acknowledging reality and grieving that genuine hope can be discovered, a hope that can be experienced by all. In reflecting upon these matters I became aware that I will not be a neutral presence in Germiston as someone who is British, male and white, historically a lethal combination!

It would give a false impression if I implied that all our time at All Nations was spent reflecting theologically on cross-cultural ministry. Alongside the course, Jane and I needed to deal with the practicalities of leaving the UK for South Africa. Principally, this meant applying for a volunteer visa, which may sound straightforward but certainly wasn't. The requirements for the visa included obtaining a police clearance report, a general medical report and a chest x-ray! It took several weeks to acquire all the paperwork needed to be able to apply for the visa at the South African High Commission in London. We duly arrived to find, after two hours of waiting, that we needed additional paperwork. Thankfully, with help from an administrator at the MCSA, we were able to return the following day with the additional paperwork and our application was accepted. We then waited for a month while the application was being processed only to receive an email at 5pm on the day before collection stating that our visas wouldn't be issued until an additional letter was submitted! Again, the administrator at the MCSA came to our rescue, supplying that additional letter which enabled our visas to be issued – just one week before we were due to fly to Johannesburg.

Having secured our visas we knew that we would definitely be travelling to Germiston in mid-December 2014. Having completed the course at All Nations, we visited both sets of parents to say our final farewells. It was a very emotional week, but one with an unexpected twist. Jane's mum, Anne, had been experiencing some health problems during the autumn for which she received some tests. It was while Jane and I were on the coach to London for our flight that Jane received a call from her sister to say that Anne had a brain tumour. We were then faced with a dilemma: do we get on the plane? The rest of the journey, and our time at the airport, was spent making lots of calls to family and friends discussing the situation and trying to decide what to do. With little concrete information about Anne's situation and prognosis, as well as the potential value of remaining in the UK, we decided to board the plane. It took a huge amount of courage for Jane to take that step, but her family affirmed her in that decision.

Arrival in Germiston

We arrived in Germiston on the morning of Saturday 13 December 2014 to be greeted by the Superintendent of the Germiston Mission circuit and the General Secretary of the MCSA. We arrived emotionally drained, just starting to digest the news about Anne as well as all the other farewells. Writing in March 2015 I recognise that the last three months have been a whirlwind, in which we are still caught up. Reflecting upon these more recent experiences is harder than the earlier ones, but I will try to capture something of what we have experienced.

We are living in the manse for Germiston Central Methodist Church, which had previously been let to tenants. While much preparatory work had been done, there was still much to do, not least because the tenants' cats had urinated on the carpets making them stink! We took up the carpets to uncover the wooden and stone floors beneath, but we then needed to treat them. For our first six weeks it felt as if we were living on a building site, which was unsettling. This was compounded by the procession of workers and the need to understand what was expected of us in relation to them, such as providing lunch. Relations were also complicated by the fact that the people who gave quotations were rarely the ones who did the work, raising issues about who to speak to about any issues. During our first two months we managed with the things that we had packed in the four suitcases we brought with us on the flight, together with the sparse things provided by the local church members.

The MCB had provided a grant to the MCSA with which they bought a car for us. Thankfully, this was in our drive when we arrived. Having been given a street map of the area we were able to be adventurous; Jane drove while I navigated. There was a real sense of satisfaction when we managed to find our way somewhere – and get back again! What has taken time and energy has been the research needed to find out where we might buy mundane things, about which we would give no thought in the UK. A seemingly simple task such as buying a lightbulb became a major exercise, albeit with a sense of satisfaction when accomplished. Alongside the issues of shopping are navigating systems alien to us. For example, the banking system here is different from that in the UK, with security measures preventing spending over a certain limit without clearance from a branch; it has taken time, energy and much patience to navigate this system.

Faced with so much that is new, our mantra has become 'It's not right or wrong, it's just different!' It has been helpful to think about difference, rather than to view negatively everything that is alien to us. The wisdom of Duane Elmer (2006) has been influential in helping us to consider our posture in entering this new culture. Elmer writes of cross-cultural servanthood based on a posture of openness, acceptance and trust in which people learn about, from and with others so as to understand and see through their eyes. When we have been tempted to retreat into the familiar it has been helpful to remember our need to be open and accepting of others and the unfamiliar.

One significant area of difference from the UK is that of security. We find ourselves living in a manse with a high wall and an alarm system linked to armed response. We are surrounded by houses protected by electric fences, razor wire and dogs; it didn't help us to feel secure. Soon after our arrival we found that overnight someone had tried to open our side gates. Not surprisingly, this attempted break-in didn't help us to feel relaxed. We decided that we needed additional external security in the form of infrared beams. It was interesting to see that some people understood our concerns, but some of our colleagues didn't, and so we had paid for the beams ourselves. It was disappointing that those responsible for our well-being didn't seem to appreciate our sense of insecurity and the different situation in the UK.

In addition to trying to settle into our new home, I have also been ministering in Germiston. The first service I led was on Christmas Day, less than two weeks after our arrival. Christmas felt very different, with it being mid-summer and the peak holiday season. It felt more anti-climactic than in the UK, not helped because we hadn't journeyed through Advent with the church.

The last two months have been spent trying to come to terms with the complexity of three congregations, all of which are semi-autonomous but together form the one society. I have been trying to understand the nature of my role in a society of 438 members, who are drawn from more than three distinct cultures. I now find myself expected to be in a church office several mornings each week, supported by an administrator; this is a novelty for someone used to ministering in the UK.

While Sunday worship is still a critical focus in my week, Sundays feel very different from those in the UK. There are three services each Sunday, each with its particular style and language; I usually lead one or two of these services. The lack of availability of members during the week, coupled with a reluctance to travel at night, mean that meetings take place of Sundays when we gather for

worship. It has felt very strange to move from leading worship to holding a business meeting and then to lead another service. This has been particularly challenging and demanding. However, this change is more than compensated for by the intensity of worship and the way in which worshippers willingly engage in worship. This engagement draws more from me, especially in preaching, and gives a sense of freedom that I find very stimulating. Having spent so many months in transition it feels very good to be preaching in context again, even if I am only beginning to understand the new context.

Looking to the future

Having been in Germiston for three months we are able to look back and celebrate those things that have been achieved and that help us to feel settled. However, we face a number of questions relating to our long-term settling, which we will only be able to answer over the next few years:

- How do we find an appropriate balance between investing in existing relationships and seeking to develop new ones?
- How do we support our family in a time of crisis from a distance of 5,500 miles? How do we cope with the realisation that the support we can offer is so limited?
- How do we live with the increased risk of crime without becoming paranoid and unduly suspicious of those around us?
- When will we begin to inhabit the cultures with which we are engaging? How will we live with the competing tensions of the different cultures seeking unity while valuing diversity?
- When will we be able to sufficiently adapt to our context that we are able to find ways of relaxing?
- Who will be the people and what will be the resources that help us most to adapt to our context?
- When will we find ourselves spending less energy on the demands of daily living and find that things can be done subconsciously?
- What will be our legacy in Germiston?
- How do we prepare the way for our successors?
- How will God shape us more into the likeness of Christ through our experiences?

Notes

1. Germiston is a city in the East Rand, south east of Johannesburg, established in 1886, following the discovery of gold. Gold mining has been prominent in Germiston's history, especially since 1921 when the Rand Gold Refinery was built, handling three-quarters of gold mined in the world. While gold mining has declined in significance since the 1950s, Germiston remains a vibrant city with a range of industries and serves as an important railway junction (Bonner and Nieftagodien 2012).
2. www.allnations.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=120.

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