



Costly Discipleship in South Africa

By Robert Evans



Zimbabwean refugees sleep on the floor of the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg

Photo from Medecins sans Frontiers www.msf.org

The plight of refugees and the homeless is a worldwide crisis in which the church must play a role. One of the most courageous and prophetic ministries addressing this crisis is in the Central Methodist Mission, Johannesburg, South Africa. A long-term Plowshares partner, Bishop Paul Verryn, and his congregation have been providing shelter each night for about 2000 men, women and children, primarily refugees from Zimbabwe but also homeless South Africans. Every inch of the church building except the sanctuary is filled each night. In facilitating this shelter, Bishop Verryn and the Methodist Mission have become the national voice of refugees and the homeless in South Africa.

The Central Methodist Church has done more than simply provide sanctuary. There is a medical clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in the vestibule. The refugees developed a school for refugee children, a governing body for their community, and employment-generating courses in computers, tailoring, and training as security guards and other employment. This is a ministry which highlights human dignity and empowerment. Responding to a call from Verryn in January, Alice, Verryn and I worked with the refugee community, equipping them with conflict transformation skills, running a session on trauma healing and facilitation of small groups to care for other refugees in South

Africa and preparation for their eventual return to Zimbabwe.

In the face of xenophobic attacks on refugees and police raids on the church itself, Bishop Verryn has challenged the South African government over their responsibility to care for vulnerable people. With human rights and legal advocates and other religious leaders, Verryn has called the leaders of South Africa to be accountable for their protection in the name of both Christian and humanitarian compassion as well as legal responsibility. Through the courts, this alliance has challenged both the government officials in charge of the care of refugees and the police responsible for their protection.

In preparation for the World Cup in June, government officials are anxious to disguise the embarrassing problem of refugees and the homeless. Based on our experiences in South Africa, we can only assume that the goal to hide these problems put pressure on the leaders of the Methodist Church. They suspended Paul Verryn from ministry ostensibly for his advocacy with the court and communication with the media without the explicit permission of the church, despite the fact that he and Central Methodist have been praised for their prophetic ministry from religious leaders throughout South Africa and the world. His is certainly a case of costly discipleship. The Bishop's suspension has been challenged and was in arbitration when this newsletter was published.

Prior to this crisis Bishop Verryn had agreed to offer course at Hartford Seminary during a sabbatical leave from the Central Methodist Mission this fall. "Interfaith Perspectives on Poverty," focusing on the role of the faith community with the poor and homeless, will be offered on Wednesday evenings from Sept. 15 to Dec. 15. This is a unique opportunity for those in Hartford area to encounter a Christian leader and anti-apartheid activist who has now taken on a prophetic but costly ministry in the name of the poor and homeless.

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Plowshares has been busy working with partners new and old. Since our Fall 2009 newsletter we have consulted with many of our local and international partner and conducted conflict transformation workshops in South Africa, China, Indonesia and the United States.

Johannesburg, South Africa: As discussed in the cover article, the Evans and Bishop Verryn facilitated workshops for leaders of the community of refugees and homeless who have found sanctuary in the Central Methodist Church of Johannesburg. We focused on questions of the rights of refugees and the poor, and strategies for intervening in the tragedy of Zimbabwe.

Beijing, China: In March, the Evans and Ms. Yan Yan Yip of Civic Exchange in Hong Kong led the third basic workshop in the Risk Management for a Harmonious Society project. Ninety people applied for the thirty spots in this workshop! The final group included representatives from government ministries, university departments, religious organizations and community NGOs.



Beijing workshop participants adopt symbols from one of the learning exercises in conflict transformation.

Jakarta, Indonesia: Plowshares' partnership continues with Hafid Abbas at Ministry of Law and Human Rights and with Kadarmanto Hardjowasito and colleagues at the Center for Empowering Reconciliation and Peace (PPRP). In November Bob led a workshop in Jakarta with Kadarmanto for the Ministry for thirty participants from throughout Indonesia on Conflict and Cross Cultural Dialogue. This served as preparation for a future consultations and workshops in Papua.

Simsbury, Connecticut, USA: The Plowshares Staff led a one-day workshop hosted by the Simsbury United Methodist Church entitled "Conflict Transformation for Congregations and Communities." Participants included pastors and lay leaders from several of our area council member churches, a pastor from Massachusetts and a Jewish peace advocate from Washington DC.

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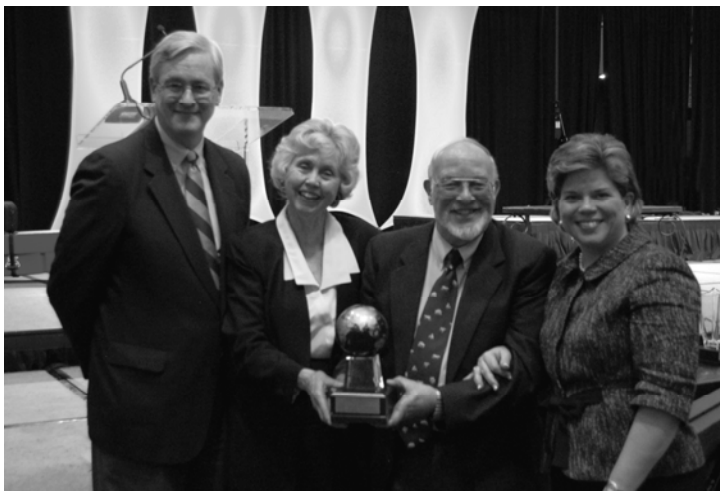
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The Evans win the Global leadership Award of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU)

Plowshares Institute has facilitated two international faculty development seminars to Indonesia and South Africa for the CCCU/Nagel Institute. Every four years CCCU hosts an International Forum. This year's theme was "Critical Breakthroughs" and highlighted: reconciliation, science, education, development and art. More than 2000 people, representing over 100 colleges, attended the Forum which was held in Atlanta in February.

The Forum opened with a video address from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Chair of Plowshares International Advisory Council. This video was followed by the presentation of the Council's Global Leadership Award to the Evans. Bob and Alice accepted the award on behalf of our partners worldwide working for peace and reconciliation. This award presentation provided an opportunity to highlight Plowshares international strategies for peace building and especially the education of peace builders.

The topics of reconciliation, education and art were featured in special events which shared insights from the Nagel seminars to Indonesia and South Africa. The Charis art exhibit from the Indonesian faculty development seminar was a prominent feature of the conference. A panel of African and North American scholars from the 2009 faculty development seminar to South Africa addressed the role of public theology in both Africa and North America. The panelists' reflections and those of others from this seminar will be captured in a book of essays on the same theme. CCCU and the Nagel Institute announced their intentions for faculty seminars facilitated by Plowshares Institute in China in 2011 and Brazil in 2012.



Dr. Joel Carpenter, Director of the Nagel Institute and Dr. Mimi Barnard, Vice President of CCCU, with Alice and Bob at the award ceremony in Atlanta.

Interested in attending a Conflict Transformation workshop?

The Evans will be conducting a workshop at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico from August 2-6. The workshop, "Becoming Agents of Reconciliation in Congregations and Communities" is open to the public. Come hone your skills in deep listening, joint decision making and community problem solving amidst one of America's most breathtaking landscapes. For more information, go to www.ghost ranch.org to the online catalog and search for Evans in the drop down list of instructors.

Ghost Ranch has many arts and outdoor adventure programs for adults and children, so you can take the whole family.



Typical view from Ghost Ranch

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