

The Master Weaver

When God begins weaving multiple threads of varying hues and textures, the beauty and design of His tapestries are beyond what we could ever think or imagine. Although we often are afforded a view only of the underside as He weaves - what might seem tangled and senseless, when once we begin to get a glimpse of the surface, we see the amazing splendor and wisdom of His planning. Such is the case for the Zulu people of the Ntshongweni Lutheran Church in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. God has heard the cry of His people there. Out of the depth of their sufferings, stricken by poverty and the now rampant HIV/Aids epidemic and previous years of oppression and segregation and political upheaval, they have cried out to God, and He is responding with His power and grace. To God be the glory!

Ntshongweni is nestled in the verdant Valley of a Thousand Hills outside the port city of Durban in Kwazulu-Natal, a breathtakingly beautiful province on the Indian Ocean in northeastern South Africa. Like many other rural South African communities, the people there are struggling for survival. Most are unemployed. Hundreds of children are orphaned. The vast majority of adults are HIV positive. The Ntshongweni Lutheran Church was built in 1988 by benefactor, Hans Beier, member of the German Lutheran Church in nearby Durban-Westville. It was at the urging of Nelson Mkhize, one of Hans' employees and a Christian in the community, who ardently sought to have a church built there. It had a thriving congregation in the beginning, but following the political uprisings in the 90's, the church has until very recently lain largely deserted. Nelson and his wife, Mildred, and a handful of faithful parishioners did their best to keep things going, while retired German pastor, Eckart Schroeder, came once a month from Durban to offer communion. With little to no resources, however, the church was badly in need of repair, and as Pastor Schroeder wrote, "I thought it was going to be washed down the drain." But God who is forever the Faithful One was, from various places and with multiple people, weaving His tapestry for the rescue of His people in Ntshongweni.

It was December 1, 1966, summertime in northern rural Kwazulu-Natal. Senzo Majola's 24 year old Zulu mother labored to give him birth and died of complications three days later. Senzo was left to be cared for by his grandmother. Along with caring for 13 other children in a small dwelling, Senzo's industrious grandmother ran a small "tuck shop" (a very small store where she sold bread and other small items to locals in the community). It was under her watchful eye that Senzo came to know Jesus. He was baptized in 1967 on Good Friday by the Presbyterian minister who came to their community once a month to hold a church service in their home. Senzo's father passed away when Senzo was young as well, and after accidentally discovering that his grandmother was not his biological mother at the age of seven, he came to know the deep pain and fear of being an orphan. In his early years there was friction with the other children in the household. Growing up in a violent time in Kwazulu-Natal which was ravaged by the effects of apartheid, Senzo's adolescent years were filled with anger and fighting. One rainy night when he was 22 he became embroiled in a skirmish trying to rescue a friend. By God's grace and design he barely escaped being shot to death, and that night, October 10, 1988, God became powerfully

real to Senzo Majola. Humbled and full of gratitude, he knew that it was God who had spared him from an untimely death, and he began questioning the reason. Within 24 hours he had his answer. Through a friend he discovered that there was a Lutheran seminary nearby where young men were studying to be pastors. On October 12th Senzo set out on an hour and ten minute walk and arrived at the Seminary where he began his training to become a Lutheran pastor. During those years he experienced the love and grace of God and the spiritual fathering of Pastor Nkambule and Pastor Gabela. On June 25, 1995 Senzo Majola was ordained into full time pastoral ministry where he served faithfully for seven years. It was a time of joy for him as well as much learning; yet he felt a strong need to further his skills. He took some time off from ministry and received an advanced diploma in management and communication. It was in 2006 that Pastor Majola began to understand how God was unfolding His plan and purpose for his life. Through the masterful weaving of a variety of colorful threads, both from South Africa and abroad in America, in September, 2006, God called Senzo Majola into pastoral ministry at Ntshongweni Lutheran Church. He was installed with the express purpose of building up the community of Christians there to be a powerful weapon in fighting back against the rising tide of HIV/ AIDS that is devastating the people, to find ways to reach out to the hundreds of orphaned children and widows in their community, and to support the many grandmothers and older aunts that are stretching to take in the stranded orphans. It is a huge task, but one that has touched Pastor Majola's heart in a profound way. His memories of his own pain and fears as an orphan have been translated into a deep passion for caring for the orphaned children of Ntshongweni. Just as he has experienced the Father-heart of God in his own life, he now has been given the opportunity to impart that love to these children.

Since his installation Pastor Majola has worked tirelessly to give arms and legs to that love. He has been preaching and teaching, baptizing and confirming, visiting and sharing the love of Jesus with the people of his community. In December, 2006 the church hosted 200 youth in a South Africa Lutheran Youth Gathering, In March, 2007 he brought together 30 orphans for a weekend retreat where they built relationships and addressed the subject of HIV. In April he organized the under-13 year olds into a soccer team. These are special orphans. By the end of this year they and their caregivers will all be living in new block homes. These homes are being built through the combined efforts of Ntshongweni Lutheran Church, Bishop Tswaedi and the Lutheran Church of South Africa, the neighboring Lutheran church of Durban-Westville, the local Ntshongweni community leaders, U.S. and Canadian Lutheran churches, and THRIVENT Builds Worldwide in partnership with Habitat for Humanity Global Village. But not only will each of these families be living in a new concrete house, they will be invited to live in a new spiritual home as well, a home where they will be valued and embraced with the love of Jesus and the people of Ntshongweni Lutheran Church. God has indeed been weaving.

Christ Church - Lutheran in Phoenix, Arizona, has had a particularly motivating influence as one of the threads in this process. Through the vision, prayer and determination of long time member, Bob Funk, a growing awareness of the needs of AIDS orphans in Africa has emerged among the congregation. As he and other interested members learned more and began to network

throughout the Lutheran Church in America and in Africa, God's plan began to be revealed. Christ Church was being called to join in partnership specifically with Ntshongweni Lutheran Church in South Africa in their fight against AIDS and in caring for the growing number of AIDS impacted orphans. This partnership was able to become a reality through their partnering as well with THRIVENT Builds and Habitat for Humanity. As a result, in September, 2006, a team of 20 members from Christ Church - Lutheran spent two weeks in Ntshongweni. The Lutheran church there was remodeled with fresh paint, new windows, repaired pews, and a bright new banner. A 3-bedroom parsonage with office space was also erected just in time for Pastor Majola's Installation. In addition, arrangements were made by Christ Church to help support his salary for the coming year. In April, 2007, another 10 member team from Christ Church-Lutheran and a 12 member team from Pennsylvania joined with the local people to build the first two 3-bedroom block homes for orphans and their caregivers in Ntshongweni. The families have now moved in and have begun attending the church. 13 more new homes are planned to be built by the end of 2007; 13 more teams are being prepared to be sent from the US and Canada to help with these homes. Christ Church is committed to ongoing support and prayers for Ntshongweni for the next five years, and is seeking to gain the help of other interested churches and individuals in supporting this work as well.

A few months ago Zanele Nzimande, a 41 year old disabled mother of four, was living in a mud hut on a hilly slope in Ntshongweni. A fierce storm arose and washed away the mud walls, leaving them destitute, without a home and dependent on relatives for shelter. Today this family has moved into a substantial block home which will be able to withstand the storms of the future. The Dube family has also moved into their new home. There is much help that they need yet. Food, clothing and furnishings are scarce. Ntshongweni Lutheran Church is committed to helping them get the assistance they need. This is true for all 15 families that will be residing in the new THRIVENT Builds - Habitat for Humanity homes that are being built this year. Pastor Majola and some of his members, as well as Hans Beier, have been working with the community steering committee in identifying the needy families and securing the land on which the homes are being built. The church is also committed to the spiritual and emotional well-being of these families. Pastor Majola and the members of Ntshongweni Lutheran Church have opened their hearts and arms to these families and especially to the orphans. Already some of the young boys are coming after school to talk with Pastor. Others have started coming to church. Members are working to develop a food bank at the church. Dreams are being entertained to provide tutoring and a drop-in center for kids after school. Although the tapestry is still being woven, one can begin to see the beautiful patterns emerging. The threads are being tightly intertwined. God has indeed heard the cry of his people in Ntshongweni. He has come to their rescue. He has renewed their hope.

Many of us on the US build teams feel privileged to have come to know and love these warm and fun-loving Zulu people and are forming life long relationships with them. Their contagious smiles and laughter and spontaneity in breaking out into song and dance have inspired us. To be able to join them in their building process and in their fight against AIDS and in their care for the orphans is a gift God has given us. As we pour out that gift to our brothers and sisters in Ntshongweni,

the gift returns to us manifold, as they rejoice and thank God and give Him the glory. As our teams have worshipped together with the community of Ntshongweni Lutheran Church on Sunday at the conclusion of a week of building, there have been very few dry eyes. We praised God in Zulu and in English, and we all thanked our God that we are included in the multiple, colorful threads woven by the hands of the Master Weaver. Thank you, God, for the magnificent tapestry you are weaving in Ntshongweni, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa.

Siyanikhumbula (we remember you)

Mary Lynn Sheldon

Christ Church - Lutheran, Phoenix, Arizona USA

Thrivent Builds Worldwide/ Habitat for Humanity Global Village Build Team GVT07607, April 13 -23,2007

May 16, 2007