

Women in International Mission

Ana Gobledale

**Amazing grace, how sweet
the sound, that saved a wretch
like me!**

**I once was lost, but now am
found, was blind but now
I see.**

— Hymn 547,
The New Century Hymnal



**‘Twas grace that taught my heart
to fear, and grace my fears
relieved;
How precious did that
grace appear the hour I first
believed!**

As a floundering young adult, I found myself an atheist studying at the Divinity School at The University of Chicago through a full scholarship from the Disciples of Christ. While I loved church, I had never had much liking for a God who allowed wars, hunger and greed to devastate our planet. I left theological studies to teach English at a community college and develop educational videotapes for the American Bar Association.

Born into the family of a Methodist pastor, I grew up in Bellingham, Washington, San Francisco, California and Chicago, Illinois. In 1968, as peace rallies and moratoriums swept across the nation, we joined University Church (Disciples of Christ) in Chicago, while my father returned to studies. Roy Davis, my youth leader, and Charles Bayer and Peg Stearn, my ministers, influenced me greatly during my formative teen years. Even without a belief in God, the church was always, for me, an extended family and a place to find a group committed to work for peace and justice. But only after I had started working on a Doctorate in Education, only when I was faced with a personal life crisis, did I “surrender all” and turn my life over to God. That’s when the life I have today began.

TO AFRICA...

Three months later, I met Tod and we married before the year was up. Tod set as a condition of marriage that I was willing to go to Africa. Little did I know we would head to South Africa with the Division of Overseas Ministries (Disciples of Christ) less than 2 years later...Tod to teach maths and me (newly ordained) to be chaplain at Inanda Seminary, a high school for Black girls started in the 1800’s. A year later, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) called us to a rural ministry in Zululand, a call to ordination for Tod. We served a circuit of 8 UCCSA churches for 5 years until the fact that we were living illegally in a Black-zoned area caught up with us, and our resident permits were not renewed.

Those 5 years at Mfanefile were a time of great joy and personal discovery for me. My daughter, Thandiwe, was born at Inanda (1984), and my son, Mandla, at Mfanefile (1987). I thrived on living off the grid: no electricity, no running water, no telephone, no way out if the rains turned the road to mud. Values became clarified. Racism was unmasked, as my Black neighbours welcomed and loved us and whites made it illegal for us to live in our home, illegal for Thandiwe to go to the local school, illegal for our church to gather for prayers on certain occasions. My book, “The Learning Spirit:



Ana with her family.

Lessons from South Africa” (published by Chalice Press) arose from those years, and doubled as a dissertation for my doctorate.

After 3 years serving a small town UCC parish in New Hampshire, we returned to the UCCSA, this time in rural Zimbabwe. Our children integrated the local school, and slipped right back in to being “home.” For 6 ½ years, Tod and I shared a district of 18 congregations, speaking Tswana, Ndebele and Kalanga. AIDS arrived on the scene and demanded time for education and funerals. Between apartheid and AIDS, southern Africa has been a great teacher of God’s enduring presence in the face of seemingly unendurable suffering. My faith seems to solidify, now, in the presence of hardship, for it is there I have so often seen Christ face-to-face.

I consider it a great privilege as a White North American to have had the opportunity to experience life as a racial minority, in both South Africa and even more so in Zimbabwe. It has been a blessing for my children. What some people would call “sacrifice” has, for me, been an amazing adventure with the people of God.

**Through many dangers, toils, and
snares, I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.**

TODAY...

Tod and I have always shared ministerial positions, and this time round we are chaplains and lecturers at the Churches of Christ Theological College in Melbourne, Australia. We are available to students, faculty and residents. We also organize regular programs in continuing education for ministers, and a “Movies with a Message” forum open to the wider community.

The bumper sticker, “A closed mind is a wonderful thing to lose,” hangs on our office door. An exciting part of chaplaincy, for me, is to walk alongside students as their minds open and they embrace an acceptance of the mystery of God and our faith. To see someone move from a stance of knowing all the answers to one of being comfortable with asking the questions is awe-inspiring. And it’s challenging when a student’s mind clamps down for fear of their “truth” being taken away. A weekly student-run forum called “Faith Wrestling Federation” provides a safe place for students to ask questions and reflect on possible understandings of faith questions, e.g. “Who or what is God?”, “Where does Jesus fit in?”, “What does it mean to be a disciple?”, “Why is there suffering?” Students grapple with these questions and find a place to share their doubts and wonderings.

Be still and know that I am God.

— Psalm 46:10

Prayer is the central pillar upon which my life leans. The lights, speed and action of life frequently distract me. I tend toward busy-ness rather than Godly-ness. But prayer, for me, stops the noise and creates the possibility for God’s voice to break through.

I tend to be a negative person by nature, seeing the cup half empty (or completely empty!), so it’s imperative that I start and end my day in a positive place. Writing a gratitude list in the morning, and reviewing my day with thankfulness to God in the

evening, enable me to retain a healthy mental and emotional balance (most of the time!). I often see the cup not just half full but overflowing. I have a spiritual “guide” with whom I speak regularly, and offer this relationship myself to others, some of whom I have walked with for 15 years. Weekly dates with Tod, a discipline we have kept these past 25 years, is essential for my well being and our health as a couple. We often incorporate marriage enrichment exercises into our dates.

**My God has promised good to me,
whose word my hope secures;
God will my shield and portion be as
long as life endures.**

I have been humbled many times by sensing the presence of Christ, the human embodiment of the Living God, especially during my years in southern Africa—in the stricken face of a mother whose child has died of malnutrition, in the face of a young man dying of AIDS, in the cry of a newborn baby. I find it harder to recognize Christ in the so-called First World, amidst all the distractions of materialism and opulence. But even in the midst of this darkness, the light of Christ shines forth.

I’ll call her Sarah...Sarah lives with terminal cancer, having been diagnosed 6 ½ years ago. Some people call her strong. Some people call her determined. But there’s something much more powerful emanating from Sarah. The words of the hymn, “I surrender all,” ring true. Sarah prays not for a magical cure, but for the strength to face the reality of her life and death. She prays not for an escape from death, but for grace to live fully today. A church leader, Sarah’s strength is used for church work. It is she who makes sure the visitors are welcomed and the ill are visited. Her frail body and slower pace sometimes frustrate her, but she walks close to God in her attitude of full surrender and acceptance. “I surrender all...” Sarah provides an inspiration to me. In her the face of Christ is revealed.

**When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise than
when we'd first begun.**

THE FUTURE...

Our assignment with Global Ministries in Australia concludes in December 2007. And then...? Tod and I have faith that God will continue to use us. Thank you all for holding us in your prayers.

Prayer Opportunities

- Ana's children: Thandiwe currently serving Global Ministries in India, and Mandla studying at Occidental College in California.
- The students and faculty at Churches of Christ Theological College in Australia
- Global Ministries missionaries serving in educational settings around the world
- "Sarah" and others living with terminal illnesses.

Reflection Questions

1. What daily disciplines do you practice that bring God's joy into your life?
2. When have you felt the presence of Christ through another person?
3. What does "surrender all" mean to you? Have you had an experience similar to Ana's?
4. "A closed mind is a wonderful thing to lose," reads the sign on Ana's office door. Are there areas in your thinking in which you would like a more open mind? Who might help you grow in this way?
5. If you are married or in a permanent relationship, what disciplines help you maintain a healthy couple relationship?

GLOBAL MINISTRIES

To read Ana & Tod's missionary letters, go to

http://www.globalministries.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=60&Itemid=80

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Australia

Australian Tamil Christian communities Celebrate the Haystack Bi-Centennial

Thursday, 14 September 2006

Tod & Ana Gobledale – Australia

"That is my school!" exclaims a Tamil woman at a recent Haystack celebration planning committee meeting in Melbourne, Australia. Her school, the Uduvil School pictured in the photo we are viewing, was the first school for women in Asia, she claims. Started by American Board missionaries, it provided education to her and other young women in India at a time when females were considered little more than family wealth in the form of dowries. Her education there changed her life. She proudly explains that the Uduvil School continues to provide education to women of Sri Lanka today.

to read more...visit the website.