

“Welcome Home, Brother”

Charles F. Easley, Sr.

A Soulful Greeting from Patrick in Johannesburg

The captain announced that we had been cleared to land.

South Africa Airways flight #210 made its final approach into the airport at Johannesburg, South Africa on November 14, 2003. Twenty minutes passed between the captain’s announcement and Patrick Khanyile’s soulful greeting of “Welcome home, brother!” During those twenty minutes I experienced feelings of anxiety, joy, anticipation, and praise to God for my having been given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the land where my very roots are anchored.

Jon Chapman, area coordinator for Southern and East Africa, demonstrated exceptional skills and patience as he shepherded Susan Andrews, Moderator of the 215th General Assembly (2003) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); her husband Simmons Gardner; and me throughout our thirteen-day journey to South Africa and Cameroon. It was Jon’s foresight and strong relationships with African partners that effected a comforting greeting from Patrick, which caused all of my anxieties and apprehensions to dissipate.

On Saturday evening, we were the dinner guests of Dr. Molefe Tsele, general secretary of the South Africa Council of Churches. Dr. Tsele briefed us on the status and direction of efforts and approaches of ecumenical groups toward addressing the political, religious, educational, economic, and health problems on the African continent. This was a very sobering exchange of ideas and perceptions about the role of the church in alleviating the problems that stand in the way of progress and prosperity in Africa.

One of my most culturally bonding experiences occurred during the Sunday morning visit to Soweto, where I had the opportunity to speak at the Hlanganai Parish Evangelical Presbyterian Church. During that four-hour worship service, I was graciously blessed to witness the rhythmic patterns of unaccompanied music that are the origin and source of the sounds and tempo we hear in the African American experience in the form of spirituals, gospel music, ballads, blues, and shaped-note singing. Dr. H.V.D. DeGama, pastor of this congregation, baptized forty new converts during a very spirit-filled service, where all worshipers, including myself, witnessed the movement of God.

Sunday evening dinner gave me the opportunity to test my tolerance level for many of the delicacies that are a part of luxurious and rare dining in South Africa. I “think” I was pleasantly surprised, bold, and culturally enlightened by the choices that I made during that gourmet venture.

On the following day, our group met with the staff of the South Africa Council of Churches (SACC) at its headquarters. It was so empowering and humbling to hear their stories of how the strategies and plans for sustained actions against apartheid were formulated in those hallowed halls with assistance from their ecumenical partners. Specifically, the SACC is developing strategies to involve more pastors and churches in the active fight against the ravages of

HIV/AIDS on the people of South Africa.

My cultural bonding was enhanced greatly during lunch at Mande's Café in Soweto, where we met with the leaders of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa. They were the Reverend Joseph Tshawane, moderator; the Reverend T. R. Mobie, general secretary; and the Rev. Dixon Masangu, treasurer. It was during this encounter that we were able to share humorously the "real" morals and lessons of folktales, fables, proverbs, and stories commonly expressed in Africa and in the African American experience. Those were light moments mixed with serious dialogue about the plight of the African people as they strive for relief from poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and capital flight.

Our visit to Cape Town, South Africa provided the opportunity for the group to meet with ecumenical leaders, mission personnel, seminary leaders, and members of the South Africa Parliament. My spirits were lifted and my heart was warmed as I listened to the passion with which two black female members of parliament shared their vision and plans for addressing the gender issues in the country, with specific legislation on domestic violence, widow's rights, and women's health issues.

There were many tourist attractions for us to visit, but the one that had the greatest impact on me was my visit to Nelson Mandela's cell in the Robben Island Prison. As I stood in the door of that cell, I reflected on the miracle of how he could leave there after twenty-nine years of incarceration to become president of the liberated South Africa and preach a message of love and reconciliation and achieve transfer of power and authority without violence. After this experience, I can now easily understand how Mandela is most deserving of the unconditional love and adoration of people all over the world, which was manifested further by his becoming a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Our journey continued to Yaounde, Cameroon, where we met with ecumenical partners, mission personnel, and church leaders. We attended the Eighth All Africa Conference of Churches meeting over a five-day period. The keynote speaker for the opening session was H. E. Joachim Chisano, president of Mozambique, who reminded the 5,000 delegates that the conference theme, "Come, Let Us Rebuild," suggests that more peaceful means must be employed in the transfer of power and authority to reduce the negative impact of change on people's quality of life.

Doug Welch, area coordinator for West and Central Africa, was my tutor and confidante as I moved through the public markets in Yaounde, using my newfound skills in bartering and trading.

My return home to Atlanta included a six-hour layover in Paris, France. I was only able to view Paris from our landing and takeoff, afraid to risk visiting the city for fear that my French might not have been good enough to instruct a cab driver to get me back to the airport in time for my departure!

It was very interesting that, upon my return to Atlanta, my son Chuck greeted me at the airport with the same words Patrick had used in Johannesburg: "Welcome home, brother!" From Patrick

to Chuck—what a connection! I felt as if I were being delivered back to an extension of my roots from Johannesburg to Atlanta.