

My 2003 Search for Freedom

by Sheila Johnson

When I think of freedom, I am reminded of the South African citizens that I was privileged and honored to meet in 2003 while walking on the sun drenched earth beneath my feet; some of it was hallowed ground and some of it had been desecrated by the ills of an Apartheid that met its official death in 1994, but was very much alive during my sojourn there along with other members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Our group was diverse. There were international bishops, candidates who were vying for the episcopacy office – carrying signs and voicing slogans that represented their qualifications for that coveted office of bishop; pastors and officers of local churches from near and far who came to explore the variety of customs offered by another country; and there I was wanting to meet the Afrikaans, the Black Africans, and the White Freedom workers.

I went with hopes of doing mission work side-by-side with my brothers and sisters in a faraway land that I, as a young girl, dreamed of seeing one day – a land that held precious and semi-precious gems beneath its soil that was also rich in gold and silver. I went to commune with a people that looked like me – aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, grannies and papas—my ancestors. I went to hear and learn a dialect that was foreign to my ears yet became music to my ears at the end of my journey in South Africa.

Yes, the purpose of this trip, for most, was clearly a political, ecclesial attempt to gain votes and make changes to an outdated way of doing business in the Church. But I put on my blinders for political activities, trained my ears to listen for the cries of the people, formed my lips to speak only of love and compassion, directed my feet to walk only on the hallowed ground of the Mother land (if possible) and I really, really began to search for the meaning of freedom in this land across the sea—and this is what I found:

Mothers who struggled like many Americans to put shoes on the feet of their children, clothes on their backs and food in their stomachs. I talked to missionaries who *actually did* missionary work by walking miles and miles every day to ensure that their neighbors to the north, south, east, and west had enough to get through to the next day. I talked to orphaned children whose parents had both died of AIDS, who walked the streets in 100 plus degree temperature clad in summer *and* winter clothing because that was the only available throwaway inventory for these babies and children— children who could have been *my* children had my path been differently designed. I could not help but think about freedom.

The bright, breath-taking sunrises ushered in Day and robust sunsets welcomed Night. Rainbows filled the sky after the rains. The depth of the green that colored the grass gave it an appearance of dark blue. Some say that the majestic trees were the acacia trees used by Noah and his sons to build the Ark.

Nature runs free. But for God's people—my people and your people from around the globe—

there is yet a clarion call for freedom. A