

Reflections On My Time In St. Paul

By Dr. Frederick Marais

I had the privilege to spend a sabbatical in St Paul this summer and had time to work with a number of CI partners during this time. Barbara asked me to reflect on the time in terms of Luke 10, the passage we all dwell in. I thank her for this opportunity.

Go "away" and reflect...and try to make sense out of this all was my aim. I had the privilege to work with many congregations in Southern Africa during the past 8 years as church consultant and as consultant to SAPAMC and needed to step back and reflect on the hundreds and hundreds of impressions I was left with. Where is God in all this? What should be our next steps? These were some of the questions that came with me 3 months ago. It was as if I was to much involve in all this to make sense out of it. I was in need of solitude, silence and some rest.

Sabbatical, the grace of doing nothing...I discovered the importance of being "de-centered". It was away from my family and my co-workers in Stellenbosch in a foreign country, dependent on the hospitality of others that I started my sabbatical. I must confess that I always had trouble with the command to keep the Sabbath. It baffles me and makes me uneasy. I think I am not alone in this, is it not true that most people in our modern community find it difficult if not impossible to make sense out of "doing nothing"? We fear the Sabbath, we fear doing nothing, feeling useless, un-effective, we have lost the art of being. To cope with this fear we create busy congregations or entertainment to help us survive the "Sabbath". Stay in the same house... I discovered that my own fears had to do with the fear of being with myself at the mercy of "strangers" – although the strangers was not even real strangers. I discovered that it much easier to give than except hospitality. The urge to be busy, I discovered, might be our biggest challenge in becoming missional. We need to name and confess the idolatry of the urge to be busy.

To make peace with... me, was the unexpected part of the sabbatical. In all this "de-centeredness" I discover more of myself and my calling than I ever could at home in my office doing my work. Strangers keep on asking me questions that I never could ask; sometimes they do not even ask just being in their presence using another language that helped me looking at myself from a total new perspective. I did not even know that I was in need of this. Strangers have the gift to help us make peace with our self. That was the unexpected grace of this sabbatical. Africans need

this gift from North Americans, North Americans need this from Africans, Europeans from Britons...Desmond Tutu calls this the God given "Ubuntu" spirit in humanity.



I spend a large part of my sabbatical with dr Pat Taylor-Ellison comparing congregations in the USA with congregations in Southern Africa. We used the ethno graphic data and listening reports of the congregations as our data. It was a real surprise to discover so many similarities and new challenges while doing the comparison. Stepping back from it, is the realization that God is in every place actively working in wonderful different ways. This is the Mission Dei-theology of PMC, and this is not theory, it is reality. We hope to create in the future more of these comparing conversations that will help congregations with a deeper self-understanding and sense of calling. The local setting of a congregation is like the air we breathe or the water in which we swim, we do not notice it until it is

taken away from us or replaced by something else. This is the beauty and the curse of congregations living in their local setting. In PMC we can now create the opportunity for congregations to engage in conversations with partners from different cultures and even continents in order to learn from them but also to look at ourselves through their eyes. This is a major blessing of partnering.

PMC has now become a Global initiative. Yesterday I received an e-mail from a German partner who spends time in South Africa with the leadership of the South African PMC. He and his group were inspired. Germans learning from Africans! These possibilities are unique to PMC and we should use it wisely to partner across historic, economic and geographical divides. In a real sense PMC has the theology, the structure and the ability to serve local congregations and encourage them to engage with these issues in a friendly safe setting.

CII partners and Luther Seminary colleagues were hospitable in many ways, opening their homes, finding time for me in their busy schedules, showing me around the Twin Cities, providing transport and even taking me to the ballgame, the airport, the grocery store, connecting me on the Internet. These were the many ways in which they extended peace to me. I am so indebted, knowing that I would never be able to return it. The peace returns to me ...