

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog

READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

- [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#) | [SHARE](#)

Reflection: [Reconciliation](#)



‘But now I see’: New lenses from South Africa

Friendship with those who see the world from its underside, its suffering and oppression, is one of the best ways to develop a new and clearer lens into the gospel and the church’s mission.

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#)

January 9, 2009

Editor’s note: This article previously appeared on the [Sustaining Pastoral Excellence website](#).

Recently, I met with five Duke Divinity School students to hear about their summer immersion experience in South Africa, the two months they had spent living, worshipping, and serving in a very different cultural context. Though their time in South Africa was short, the students had clearly been through something intense and transforming. For each student, the return to the United States and to their studies at Duke brought to the surface multiple tensions, struggles, and challenges. Even now, months after their return, the five students continue to process their feelings, confront the struggles and tension, and work to incorporate the lessons they learned in South Africa into their theological education.

Overall, the students expressed both acute empathy for the suffering of the people with whom they lived and profound awe at the joy they witnessed -- and shared -- amid the suffering. The students marveled at the generosity of people who have few material resources. They were overwhelmed by the radical hospitality that had been extended to them by those who have reason to suspect strangers, especially those with white skin. They envied the deep wisdom, faith, love, and hope they found among people with little formal education and limited access to resources considered essential in American churches.

The students came home with a deepened faith, less dependent on pleasant circumstances and the absence of suffering and struggle. But they also returned more aware of tensions within the context of American seminary and church life.

More On This Topic

Article

[Friendship at the heart of a mission](#)
»

Q&A

[Rod Dreher: Called to live in this community](#) »

Q&A

[Marcia Owen: Affirming the dignity of our neighbors](#) »

Article

[Bearing witness to the pain of violence](#) »

Multimedia

[Maggy Barankitse on the phrase "Love made me an inventor"](#) »

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?

Follow our content on your choice of a variety of formats, including [e-newsletters](#), [RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [iTunes](#).



GO

For these students, the economic disparity between churches in the U.S. and those in South Africa was now strikingly and painfully real. Questions about the relationship between Christian faith and economics moved to the forefront. Is there a relationship between our material wealth and spiritual poverty and the material poverty and spiritual wealth of the people whom the students encountered?

As the new school year began, the students confronted in new ways the tension between abstract theological concepts and faith practices. One student expressed impatience at discussing “abstract theories of love and failing to learn to love others, especially those who are different from us.” Another student said she now tries to see her theological studies as a present calling and not simply preparation for the “real” calling when she is appointed to a church. They all wanted their classroom experience to embody the theology and practices of Christian community.

Beneath their struggle to make sense of their South African experience, at its very core, I believe, these students long for the church and academy to embody the gospel through genuine community that includes those who are different and those who live in poverty and oppression. One student summed up the impact of his South Africa experience this way: “I have been given new lens through which to see the church and its mission.”

Excellence in ministry requires new lens through which we can view ourselves, the world, the church, and God. Friendship and solidarity with those who see the world from its underside, its suffering and oppression, is one of the best ways to discover or develop a new and clearer lens into the gospel.

New lenses, however, can create tension and discomfort. They enable us to see what we couldn't see before. They may expose realities that we would prefer remain hidden, such as our own complicity in the suffering and oppression of our sisters and brothers, or the inadequacies of our own presumed advantages and privileges, the finiteness of our own theological systems and perspectives, or the limitations of our comfortable assumptions about excellent ministry that exclude those whom Jesus called “the least of these.”

These students, with whom I continue to meet, have chosen to confront the tensions and discomfort created by their new lenses. They are exhibiting excellence in ministry, and they just might be a catalyst by which the church and the academy see anew the gospel and the church's mission.