

Tuesday, 25 October 2005

Today has been a strange day. It has been as frantic and busy as any Tuesday but there have been moments, just seconds at a time, where everything has seemed to slow down and I was able to step back and get a glimpse of the -"BIG PICTURE"- going on around me – the busyness of a receiving area of a store as I walk through it all with a few trolleys of "waste" bread – children playing in dusty side streets as I ride past rows of shacks – I see hungry people watching me as I offload bread in a church yard – share the word of God and some encouragement with a group of people who have come to collect their food parcels and I can hear an old lady at the back softly thanking the Lord for providing for her and her grandchildren – the happy chaos of 80 something kids laughing and joking around while enjoying a cup of good soup and a roll – the only meal many of them will have today!

Tuesday is a busy day!!

Thank you everyone who gives me an occasional call to find out how it's going and what's been happening and to offer your encouragement and support. And to those of you who haven't heard from me in a while, I am sorry that it has taken me so long, AGAIN, to fill you in on what has been happening. I started this letter many times over the last few months but never finished it in one sitting, sometimes because of sheer busyness and sometimes because of feelings of overwhelming sadness for what life is like for so many people.

Last I wrote was on the 23rd of June this year so I suppose I have much to catch you up on. I'll try and make it short.

Don and Judy were gone for 3 full months during winter and I had the opportunity to get a good feel for things (no substitute for being thrown in the deep end, right?). All went well though and I gained a better perspective on what we can practically do and not do with this ministry.

Regarding food collections: we were able to secure another bakery (NP Spar) whose "waste" we now collect 5 days a week. Although putting more pressure on time with an extra stop, what we get from them has helped even things out with regards to erratic supply and really boosted our capacity (like the 678 loaves of bread I once collected from three stores on a normally quiet Friday! – What to do, what to do!!) to assist other ministries. Praise the Lord, we now support 11 different ministries around the city who have a feeding programme as part of their work in poor communities. Through all these ministries we now help feed somewhere between 2 and 2½ thousand hungry people!

Our own food parcel programme has been under some pressure. There has been a drop in the amount of veggies we receive over the last while. The government also cutback on the number of people receiving social grants and daily we are overwhelmed with requests for assistance. Many of these are from outside our area of community ministry, but we help all we can. The food parcel programme needs some rework with regards to qualifying criteria and time frames but we will not likely tackle that until the new-year.

Soup kitchen saw a dip in attendance during both school holidays as many kids go and stay with relatives in the rural areas, but attendance jumped back to the usual 80-100 range soon afterwards. The other day I sat watching a little boy (4 or 5 years old – he doesn't know) walk up the alley behind our building to get some soup. The sad thing was that he had just walked the 3 odd kilometers, from his home in Soweto, by himself (something he does often) because he knows he can get a meal from us. 4 or 5 years old! On his own! It would break me if my little Jasmine or Ethan had to do that! It's hard to describe what you feel looking at

a scene like that! I have also been so impressed with many of the teenagers, who come to us, by their willingness to help and the amount of work they contribute without being asked! Something you seldom find in kids better off than them.

Two ladies from the community, who get food parcels from us and who help Nondo a lot with sorting the food we receive and distribute and also help her with the cleaning of the Centre, have been very eager to contribute more. So I taught them how to use a liquidizer and now they pretty much run the soup kitchen! They make sure there is enough veg for soup before the parcels are made up; they cook, puree and freeze it for when it is needed. They also make sure everything is ready for the soup kitchen (the soup, cups, rolls, washing and rinsing water, etc) and that everything runs smoothly and cleaned up afterwards. It is so great to see people who want to work and grow and develop and to then give them the chance to do it. There are a few more helpers around here like them and as opportunities arise we will give them the chance to contribute and grow too.

Sunday school has been going well. We have been averaging 60 – 80 kids each Sunday. Many come to us because they are too shy to go to church without decent clothes and they know they are welcome with us. We have purchased some teaching material for next year and are looking for a church that can supply us with some volunteer teachers for the first six months of next year. (Know anyone?)

Our two youth groups are going very well. The teenagers have seen a bit of a drop in attendance to between 40 – 60 each week. And, after a dip a while ago, the kids club has climbed back to a steady 60 – 80 kids. It is hard to emphasize the real importance of the impact of these two programmes in the lives of these kids. For the vast majority of kids and teens in the community it is the only place where they are taught the word of God and many of the good principles needed for a stable and successful life.

My life-skills class for teens has been going well. We have had a steady increase in attendance, from 10 when we began earlier this year, to an average of 22 lately. We have covered subjects as diverse as self image, getting to know your world, personal development, work ethics, commitment, study methods, etc. During the last school holidays I took them out for a day for a walk in Settlers Park, lunch from Mc Donald's, some time on the beach and at the Boardwalk. Some had never been to any of these places or any place even like it! And for some it was the first time this year that they had been outside of KwaZakhele! There are some really good kids there and, by the Grace of God, we are going to really help them make something of their lives.

We also held a holiday club for the younger kids during the mid year holidays. An eager group of young adults from The Way of Life Christian Church, in kwaMaxaki, were trained in child evangelism, at our Centre, by CEF and then ran the programme for the 5-day club. They really were an answer to prayer and they are the kind of groups I envision coming in and taking responsibility for programmes, like Sunday School, over a period of time.

Ever since keeping better records of attendance at our different programmes we have discovered that there are almost 600 (59?) kids who come and participate in our programmes! Only 33% seem to be there all the time but just as well – imagine if we had them all there all the time!?

The ministry is going well generally. A Mr. Matomane has kindly volunteered to help with food collections until the end of January 2006 which should free me up enough to begin working on directing the ministry and developing our programmes to better meet our goals.

Personally things are going well too. Just wondering if I'm going to get a bit of a break at the end of the year. Hunger has no contract that includes annual leave! Financially things are coming to a pinch too. Thank you to those of you who do contribute to my monthly support and to those of you who gave "lump sums" earlier this year. By the providence of God we have been able to make ends meet this year but the few months left of this year and the whole of next year are, for now, viewed only in faith.

We need to do a lot of planning and programme building and sharing and recruiting over the next while. Pray for us. Next year I would like to share the ministry and its vision with as many churches as possible to raise support, create opportunities for people to serve and contribute and also to spread the truth that we really are one church with one commission, that we can all work together and support each other and that we have a whole city to do this in.

The Lord bless and keep you all.

M a r k .

PS: Pictures speak louder than words!!



