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Who Develops Whom?

Ronan White, CSSp

A few years ago. I lived and worked with a Zulu community in the Free State Province in South Africa. Although it had been almost a decade since the abolition of the racist apartheid regime in that country, the area in which I was living did not appear to have made much progress on the road towards democracy and equality.

Town and Township

As in the old apartheid days, the locality was still divided into two very distinct and unequal parts. On one side sat “*idolobha*” or “the town” which was blessed with neatly planned, tree-lined tar roads, a constant water and electricity supply, modern brick houses, and contained all the shops and state offices. With only a few exceptions, it was populated entirely by white people.

But then, the tar roads halted abruptly and became mere mud tracks. This was where the town ended and “*ilokishi*” or “the township” began. At this point, the trees disappeared to reveal a vast and haphazard sprawl of corrugated iron shacks, most of which were without water or electricity. Apart from two European missionaries, the township was populated entirely by black people.

The people of the township deeply resented their neighbours over in the town, whom they considered responsible for the perpetuation of deeply unjust and discriminatory structures within their locality. Such resentment was further fueled by the fact that the sewerage from every house in the town continued to be piped down to the centre of the township, producing a heavy and woeful stench which the light breeze from the nearby hill was never able to disperse. These foul fumes were a daily reminder of the racism and hostility which poisoned the entire locality. In fact,

the two communities co-existed in a state of constant tension, mutual fear and polarization. Black and white people seldom mixed — apart from when work situations required communication. Indeed they lived in two different, almost mutually exclusive worlds.

Vusi's mother

It was in this context that one day, at the end of a class I had been facilitating in one of the township schools, a student named Vusi approached me for a chat. He explained that this mother had been trying to support two young students in another school where she worked as a cook. She had

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become very worried about these two boys who were struggling to survive in very difficult circumstances and now she wanted me to discuss their situation with her. I had already come in contact with Vusi and his family and was aware of their own difficult living conditions. Consequently I was quite surprised to hear that his mother, who had plenty of children herself to take care of, was attempting to support two other children in difficulties. At lunch-time that same day, myself and Vusi set off together and headed towards his mother's workplace.

Her two boys

Vusi's mother worked in a school over in the town, which during the apartheid era had been “white-only”. However, since the collapse of apartheid, black children had been accepted into the school. Consid-



ering the friction and lack of meaningful contact between the two communities in the locality, as well as the continued inequalities in terms of wealth, it was clear that it was two of these children that Vusi's mother was attempting to support.

As soon as we arrived at the rather grand school building, Visu took me down to the sweltering, steamy kitchen where his mother was working. There, in the heat and noise of the kitchen, she spoke to me about her fears for the well-being of the two young boys she had come to know in the school. Their mother had died some months earlier and their father, who was drinking very heavily, was seldom in the home and took no care of them whatsoever. Vusi's mother had noticed recently that the boys were arriving at the school very dirty and very hungry. She had also noticed how, in this still rather well-to-do school, they had become the butt of the cruel jokes and jeers of the other children.

No doubt, as a black woman who had been on the receiving end of the mocks and taunts of white people during a lifetime in the apartheid era, she had been disturbed to see these children being taunted by their fellow students. She spoke of how she was trying to support them and of how they needed further assistance which she felt unable to provide.

Running to their mother

After listening to Visu's mother tell their story, I asked if I could have a chat with the two children. So she took me up to the playground and called them over, and they ran over to her as any kids would run to their own mother. But these dirty, hungry children were not at all as I expected them to be.

They were white.

This is a story of development — the development of meaningful communication and reconciliation within a polarized community due to the compassion, dignity and love of a woman who could see beyond the bitterness of her own demeaning conditions, to identify her "oppressors" as fellow human beings with their own pains and vulnerabilities. It is also the story of my own personal development, of how I was developed by this same woman who revealed to me my own prejudices, preconceptions and misconceptions and helped to point me beyond them. ■

Ronan White is now a Spiritan missionary in Mozambique.

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