

We Love to Tell the Stories
125 Years of Making God's Love Real

An Unexpected Calling
Cheri Roland

To say that I was called to go to South Africa seemed pretentious. Until it happened!

We moved to Tampa in 1985. We found wonderful fellowship in HPUMC, and quickly became integrated into all aspects of the church family. I joined the Missions Committee. As our church grappled with what it meant for us to follow Jesus, we embraced more and more mission projects around our city and our globe. Faith seeds were sprouting in the corners of my life, in my prayers, in my working as a nurse with patients in jail.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Storey visited Hyde Park for one of our annual Missions Conferences. He had led the Methodist Church in Southern Africa in its opposition to Apartheid. [You can read Peter Storey's witness in [*A Protest at Midnight: Ministry To A Nation Torn Apart.*](#)]

Because the government closed the seminaries, those who wanted to become ministers shadowed local pastors for a while without formal theological training. In the late 1990's, the Lord inspired Peter Storey with an audacious plan to build a seminary in Pietermaritzburg, the home of the University of Kwazulu-Natal. How could a seminary be built from the ground up in this country recovering from the poison of racial division, murder and strife? Church leaders repeatedly told Peter he was crazy. Nonetheless, he began fundraising, sharing this vision with congregations in the U.S. As he presented his plan to Hyde Park leaders, it struck me: This man had the faith to move mountains! Crazy, but leave the impossible to God.

At the same time, God was urging me do something, but what? I mentioned to Doug the possibility of using vacation time to go on a short-term mission trip. He responded that history reeked of white missionaries destroying indigenous peoples. This was not for him.

Time ticked away. The tug to serve was insistent. Doug was hearing it, too. This pull became galvanizing. It was all we prayed and talked about. Meanwhile,

in Sunday school and sermons discussion revolved around how to discern the voice of God in our prayers. Our Missions Committee brought many folks to our campus who had devoted their lives to service; their stories inspired us. We were surrounded by role models: the Christian Peacemakers group included Rose and Haven Whiteside, HPUMC's own fearless souls devoted to stopping war and conflict. Our church included many others daily serving our community's disenfranchised. Bernie Leiving and Jim Harnish protested openly against our country going into war with Iraq. The Holy Spirit was on the move.

We researched service organizations. It was tricky. We were not young anymore. What could an attorney with a bad back do? I was a nurse, slightly more marketable. There were issues of cost, healthcare availability, housing and food. We applied to the Peace Corps until I flunked the physical! Reality set in, along with major disappointment.

In 2007 Doug led a two-week mission team to Johannesburg and Cape Town while I recovered from surgery. The team met with Peter Storey on his home turf. Over lunch, he asked Peter if there might be something we could do at the new seminary. He replied, "I don't know how we'd use an attorney." Doug answered that he could sweep floors.

The call from the Lord was tangible. It was now undeniable. God clearly had South Africa on our radar, but what, how, where? Our church family continued to support us with prayer and encouragement. As days turned into months we wondered if God had given up on us, or if we weren't trying hard enough, or if we weren't willing to sacrifice enough. Doubt swirled around us.

We led another mission team to SA the next year and scoured the area around Pietermaritzburg for mission organizations that might fit with our needs. Finding none there, we returned home to pray, listen, and keep searching.

Two long years later an email arrived from the president of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, still under construction. Just like that a two-year volunteer position was laid in our laps. We immediately called the president's number, having no regard for what time it was over there.

President Ross explained our half of the curriculum would provide students real life experience using what they were learning from the academic/theological side of their education. He even told us about those niggly details of our living accommodations and health care. This was all we had been praying for!

We rushed to a missions meeting, floating into church as new people. What our doubt had labeled as impossible was happening! God's call on our lives was suddenly given wings. We gleefully shouted to the group, "We're going to South Africa!" Everyone cheered. Our prayer warriors had a huge stake in this adventure; we begged them to continue lifting us up.

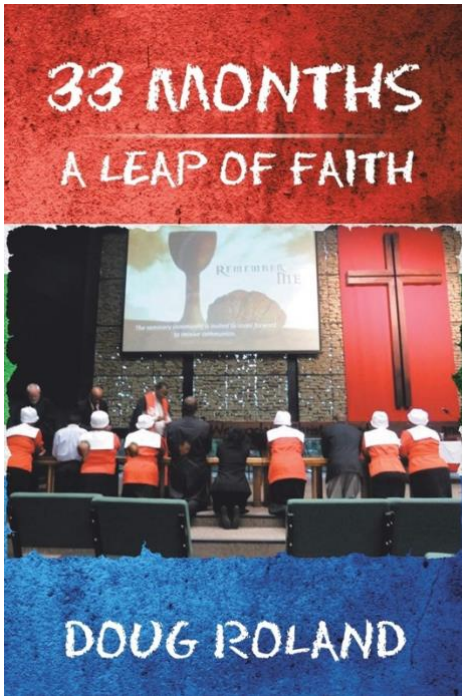
We returned home flushed with excitement. Suddenly reality hit us in the face. We were both still working. Our long-awaited granddaughter was only six months old. What would happen to our home? Our Hyde Park family immediately surrounded us with support and affirmation. The Lord kept His hand on us as details untangled. A mystifying peace descended thru the chaos. We found ourselves living in SA four months later.

It was not all smooth sailing. We experienced daily doubts and hurdles while building our program out of prayers and dreams. We enlisted twenty-one service organizations where seminarians would volunteer to care for folks cradle to grave while practicing Jesus' teaching of servanthood.

Black seminarians were very resistant to two "white hairs" from America directing them to "work without remuneration." The lingering effect of Apartheid was precluding any white person requiring Blacks to work without pay; no self-respecting Black person would ask another Black to do the same. This was an eureka moment! In our ignorance, God had positioned us in a role that could only be accomplished by outsiders.

Our two-year stint extended to three as the Seth Mokitimi Seminary became the training ground for new leaders transforming SA and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Doug and I are forever grateful for the part we were blessed to play. It was an undeniable call on our lives, the most fulfilling, the most difficult, the most wonderful thing that had ever happened.

Doug's account of the experience is available at Amazon: [33 Months: A Leap of Faith](#).



[Note: I have pictures of the seminary and of Doug and Cheri if you can use them. JAH]