Prayer and Dreams:
Answered and Experienced

by

Pastor Tom Hux
Pastor, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Salem, Oregon

Permission to Dream

I first heard about the Clergy Renewal Program from my partner in ministry, Pastor Don Brandt. We had been serving together as co-pastors at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Salem, Oregon, for seven years. One day while having coffee together, he reminded me that after seven years, I was eligible to take a sabbatical. He also reminded me of a grant program he himself had applied for a couple years earlier – the National Clergy Renewal Program. He gave me the contact information. A couple days later, I got online and checked it out. Now, after several years, I don't know if I remember the actual wording, but I know what the website said to me, “If money were not a factor, what type of experience would inspire and refresh you for ministry?” I was just given permission to dream. Immediately, my dreams took me to South Africa.

The History

In 1987, during my first year at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in Berkeley, California, I met a man who, with his family, changed my life and faith in many ways. His name is Pastor Tshenuwani Simon Farisani, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (ELCSA), outspoken anti-apartheid leader, exile,
former detainee and torture victim, a man of profound faith, love, and courage. Following his release from a South African prison and his exile to the United States, he and his family spent their first months in Minneapolis at a torture rehabilitation center. When he was healthy enough, he was hosted by PLTS as an adjunct faculty member and he and his family moved to Berkeley.

All of the students knew of him as we all attended various lectures that he gave, and everyone was inspired and humbled by him. Word soon went out that he and his family needed help. With Pastor Farisani lecturing on campus and literally around the world teaching the facts of Apartheid, and his wife, Reginah, working on her Master’s Degree in Education, they needed help with their three young children, daughters Nzumbu (9) and Ndamu (7), and son, Zwo (4). The kids not only needed supervision, but Pastor Farisani, who was considered a ‘terrorist of the mouth’ by the Apartheid government, had experienced many threats and suspicious occurrences here in the U.S. and there were concerns for his children’s safety as well. As the appeal went out through the PLTS student body, three of us became ‘the babysitters,’ which gave us the life-changing opportunity to know the Farisani family personally. We were privileged to hear first hand stories of faith, hardship, and God’s power, some of which that are written in books.

One evening in 1989, still two years before the Apartheid government agreed to peace talks with the African National Congress, Pastor Farisani took me aside, placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “One day you will come to see us in our country when we are free.” With the Apartheid government still brutally clinging to power and my financial state as a student, both the South Africa’s freedom and my ability to travel there seemed a distant hope.

As my years in Berkeley drew to a close and I prepared for my first call as the pastor of a three-point parish in north-central Montana, Pastor Farisani, at great risk to his life, began traveling back to South Africa in 1991 to help with the peace negotiations and transfer of power as the Apartheid regime began to yield to domestic and international pressure. The year 1991 was the beginning of my separation from the Farisanis.

After moving to Montana, I saw the Farisani family only twice more before they moved back to South Africa. As Nelson Mandela became the first president of a free South Africa 1994, my dear mentor and his family returned home to a free South Africa. The first and seemingly most impossible part of Pastor Farisani’s hopeful prayer had been answered in a manner that caused rejoicing around the world. With the new government in place, Nelson Mandela asked Pastor Farisani to chair the Commission for Prison Reform in the reborn nation. Later, he was asked to serve his home province of Limpopo (5.5 million people) as the Minister of Agriculture, and four years later to serve as Minister of Transportation. In 2004, he was elected Speaker of the Legislator of Limpopo. For each of these
political appointments, he first asked the Church how he should serve. He is, first and always, a pastor and servant of Christ and His Church. For each task, the ELCSA answered that he could serve the Church best by serving his country. Even in his current position as Speaker, he still served as a pastor – preaching, teaching, visiting the sick, and all that encompasses pastoral ministry. He is also the director of the Church Center Beuster, the mission founded by German Lutheran missionaries in the 1880's, a place that represents where the gospel was first preached in that region of southern Africa. During the Apartheid years, the Church Center was Pastor Farisani’s home and the place from which he was repeatedly arrested and ‘detained’, never being formally charged with any crime. The Center continues to be used to this day providing ministry and service to the congregations and people of the area. Since his return to South Africa he has been and continues to be a very busy man.

As South Africa grew into its hard-won freedom and Pastor Farisani continued his personal odyssey from detainee and torture victim to the second most powerful political leader in his province, my life was unfolding on the northern prairie of Montana. The small congregations I served proved to be the perfect place to grow into a pastor. My wife, Brenda, and I married in 1992 with the goal of celebrating our tenth anniversary in South Africa. In 1995 our first son, Victor, was born, followed 15 months later by our second son, Thomas. Six weeks after his birth, the growing Hux family packed up our possessions and moved to Salem, where I had accepted a call to serve as co-pastor of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. By the time our tenth anniversary rolled around, we had welcomed our third son, Luke, into our family. Financially, the thought of South Africa seemed a dream so far in the future we could not even imagine it. Then I read the National Clergy Renewal Program application and the dream was reborn.

**The Dream Developed**

“That all might know Christ’s love” is the mission statement of our congregation. It is simple, yet it reveals the theology and heart of our congregation, reminding us to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and in deed. Evangelism and social outreach are both necessary to fulfill this mission in our community and beyond. Upon reading the application, my heart immediately jumped to South Africa. But the more I prayed about the opportunity, the more a clear focus or theme emerged. For years, both as a pastor and lay member, I had noticed a strange dynamic of congregational life. Whereas biblically, evangelism and social outreach are inseparable, it seems that congregations, individuals, and even entire denominations gravitate toward one aspect of Christian ministry at the expense of the other. Some focus on the call to evangelism – to proclaim, explain, and defend the gospel to the world. Others seem reluctant to speak the gospel, content to offer service and compassion to their community. I am a firm believer that Christ’s call requires us to be faithful to both aspects of this calling.
As the idea of a renewal sabbatical developed, I tried to envision an experience that would challenge and refresh both aspects of Christian ministry in me. It didn’t take long for the dream to take focus.

First, my family and I would spend six weeks working in South Africa with the Farisani family and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa. If anyone in my life was a role model for Christian involvement in social ministry, it has been Pastor Farisani. Second, I wanted to strengthen my passion for evangelism by visiting the congregation of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, the birthplace of the evangelism program, The Alpha Course, which I had been leading in our congregation for four years. I envisioned just being a ‘church mouse’ by attending services and activities, and hopefully interviewing key staff members, including the author of the Alpha Course, Rev. Nicky Gumbel. The third part of the program would be to bring Pastor Farisani and his wife to Salem, to be the guest speaker for our congregation’s annual renewal weekend which we call Second Wind.

The Dream Becomes Reality

After our congregation received notification that Our Savior’s Lutheran Church had been awarded the National Clergy Renewal Program grant of $42,000, I immediately started making plans. I was already registered to attend an Alpha Course conference where Rev. Nicky Gumbel, the author of the Alpha Course, was speaking. In a serendipitous moment, I had the opportunity to meet him and let him know of my ‘church mouse’ plan to visit Holy Trinity Brompton. He said, “You know that’s great and you are welcome anytime, but every fall we host a pastor’s retreat for about ten to twelve pastors from the U.K. and U.S. Why don’t you come for the retreat? Just call the church and tell them I invited you.” This invitation resulted from a conversation that lasted less than five minutes. It was the first sign of God taking what I had dreamt and tweaking it to make it even greater than I had imagined.

National Clergy Renewal Program – Phase One: Holy Trinity Brompton

In October of 2004, my family and I flew to England for some much needed time together and for me to attend the pastor’s retreat at Holy Trinity Brompton. As per the plan, this was to be the part of my sabbatical that would inspire me for evangelism. I was not disappointed.

In the Alpha Course, one of the most powerful sessions is the talk, “Why did Jesus die?” In our own congregation, this session has consistently been one of the most powerful, life-altering experiences for Alpha participants. While attending the pastor’s retreat, I had the privilege of attending that particular session of the Alpha course and hearing Nicky Gumbel speak live to over 700
people, most of them between the ages of 20-30. Many were students from literally every corner of the planet. Though just a guest, I was privileged to experience the raw power of the gospel of Jesus Christ breaking down barriers of race and culture and changing lives. I was experiencing the fulfillment of the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Romans 10:14; “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” These guests had been welcomed to the church with a wonderful meal and just had the opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed and explained. Then, to follow up, the gathering broke into small groups to discuss and share their insights. It gave me a beautiful picture of evangelism the way the Apostle Peter instructed, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect…” (1 Peter 3:15)

For the congregation of Holy Trinity Brompton, the Alpha Course is the entry way into the church, but the ministry doesn’t end there. Their systematic approach to building relationships, caring for the needs of those coming to faith, incorporating them into the life of the congregation, and training and equipping them to use their gifts in the ministry of the congregation was mind-blowing. I literally came home fired up to reorganize our congregation from the ground up. I have since realized that many of those proposed changes require prayer, casting the vision, and allowing God to work within our congregation, not just to try to impose another congregation’s structures on our own. What has stuck with me are the principles – every member grounded in the gospel and in Scripture; relationship-based evangelism, pastoral care and discipleship; and leadership that seeks to empower all members to use their God-given spiritual gifts in the service of Christ.

Later in the retreat, our group of pastors had the privilege of meeting with Rev. Sandy Miller, the senior pastor of Holy Trinity Brompton. We talked of worship styles, practice, and agendas. I remember him sharing with us his instructions to worship leaders. He tells them,

“I want you to consider your role as a worship leader to be like that of an usher... the first person you see upon entering the church, yet quickly forgotten as you usher them into the presence of God.”

I reflected on how many worship experiences I have had – both liturgical and contemporary – where the way worship was conducted seemed to suggest more of a performance than an invitation into the presence of God. When my family and I were able to worship at Holy Trinity Brompton the following Sunday, I saw in practice what he had said. The worship band was discreetly positioned off to the side of the chancel area. A lone song leader with a guitar stood and simply invited the congregation to sing along. It was strikingly simple for as Sandy
Miller had explained: “I don’t want worship leaders to do anything that will draw attention to themselves and away from God.” I have shared this vision with our worship leaders in our congregation every since. The ‘usher analogy’ has caught on.

I came to Holy Trinity Brompton hoping and expecting to be reenergized for proclaiming the gospel, yet what surprised me the most was discovering a congregation equally passionate about ministries of compassion and social outreach. I had the privilege of going behind bars in London with Holy Trinity Brompton’s prison ministry team and visiting community service centers, sponsored and staffed by Holy Trinity Brompton members, that provided assistance with food, shelter, tutoring and education for children and adults in some of London’s most impoverished neighborhoods. In this congregation, there was no divorce between evangelism and social outreach and service. They flowed beautiful together.

In addition to these reflections on ministry and practice, I cannot begin to describe what it was like to share that time in England with my family --- sightseeing in London, visiting historical sites and museums, and eating at McDonald’s (my boys were not impressed with British cuisine). While residing at a Bed and Breakfast in London in the Lebanese district, we innocently walked into a Lebanese restaurant for dinner. We were greeted with cold, suspicious stares. People literally got up from their tables to move away from ours. We soaked in as much as we could of the rich history and vast diversity of London. What a gift to share and experience all these adventures as a family!

**National Clergy Renewal Program – Phase Two: South Africa**

In June of 2005, my family and I packed up and flew to South Africa for the long-awaited reunion with the Farisani family. We were greeted at the Johannesburg International airport by Pastor Farisani and his wife, Reginah, and four men in black suits. It turns out these were Pastor Farisani’s secret service detail. While our friends back home in the congregation were praying for our safety, God provided bodyguards! At least one would be our companion for five of the next six weeks! Pastor Farisani told us that in his life, he had been blessed to reside in both the finest and most horrible places in South Africa. Though he promised our accommodations would not include prison and torture, they did range from five star hotels to a simple room at the Church Center Beuster with no hot water and lizards on the walls. In our sojourning, we met pastors and leaders of the ELCSA, visited the families of AIDS victims, attended community events and funerals, toured prisons and former torture facilities, visited several of South Africa’s national parks, and saw and experienced things and people that will forever be a part of our lives.
Everywhere we traveled with Pastor Farisani, whether he introduced us to large gatherings or to his family and friends, he told the story of how I used to provide childcare for his children, befriended his family and supported their quest for freedom. I was embarrassed, humbled. I told him once after a gathering, “Tshenu, you are very gracious, but all I did was take care of your kids.” He answered, “Now, Tom, for you it may have been ‘just babysitting,’ but for us it meant the world. For the people here, they could never have imagined a white university student stooping to care for ‘kaffirlings’. What you did for us meant more than you know.” I remember vividly the lump in my throat and Jesus’ words coming into my mind, “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:42) I had done so little.

Like my experience at Holy Trinity Brompton, what I expected to learn and experience in South Africa did not disappoint me, but there, too, I had a surprise. Through the years of my friendship with the Farisanis I had learned how Church leaders, Christians of the (ELCSA) and Anglican Church and others had courageously and passionately worked to end the Apartheid system and keep the nation from plunging into a bloody civil war fueled by hatred and retaliation. These are Christians and congregations deeply engaged in issues of justice and politics. I had anticipated this strength in the church. But the surprise came in discovering how deeply the ELCSA was committed to and passionate about evangelism and discipleship. Again, evangelism and compassion in social action were beautifully woven together, not sacrificing one for the other.

One of my first experiences in South Africa was driving with Pastor Farisani when he received a call on his cell phone. He spoke in his native language of Venda. He speaks fourteen languages fluently. There was a friendly tone to his voice. After ending the call, he laughed and shook his head. “You would not believe who that was,” he said to me. “That was a man that used to torture me. He was calling to ask if he could use my name as reference for a job he was applying for.” I was dumbfounded. The gospel that begins with the acknowledgement that we are all sinners and each totally dependent of the grace and mercy of God allowed Pastor Farisani not only to forgive, but also to reconcile. This was one tiny example of what has taken place throughout South Africa. The gospel being lived and shared is saving a nation from destruction. According to Pastor Farisani, most leaders in South Africa agree that there are two primary reasons that South Africa has not descended into chaos. The first is the profound influence of the Christian faith. Christians comprise 70% of the population of South Africa. The second is the southern African concept of Ubuntu, the belief that relationships are of the highest value. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has explained Ubuntu in this way:

“One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human
being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity.

We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

For Pastor Farisani, a forgiven sinner himself, Christians have no other choice than to extend the grace we have received with those who have wronged us.

Another reflection from our experience in South Africa came from our visit to the Thohoyandou Regional Prison, a facility where Pastor Farisani had been detained without trial or charges under the Apartheid regime. Little did the Hux family know that we were to be given the V.I.P. treatment. We were met at the gates by the top officers of the prison as well as the Director of Prisons for the province of Limpopo. We were escorted to a conference room where we were briefed that Pastor Farisani and I would first address a gathering of correction officers, then visit three of the different units in the prison to preach the gospel to the inmates. I had no idea I would be speaking to anyone, much less officers and inmates! The Director of Prison told me, “Preach the gospel to them, they need to hear it.”

We were escorted into an auditorium filled with approximately 180 uniformed correctional officers. The Director of Prisons addressed the gathering. He introduced Pastor Farisani and myself, then said, “Before we continue, could I have a volunteer lead us in a hymn and a prayer.” One officer in the audience began singing a Christian hymn, and the gathering joined in. Then another offered a prayer. Pastor Farisani and I spoke of crime and consequence, of human dignity and the power of redemption. Many of the officers asked questions about my experiences as a volunteer at the maximum security penitentiary in Oregon. On leaving the auditorium, I whispered to Pastor Farisani, “You know, in the U.S., a meeting of state employees like this would never be allowed to open with a hymn and prayer.” I will never forget his response.

“Tom, South Africa is a true democracy and in a true democracy, people are free to participate or not in what they want. In South Africa 70% of the people are Christians. In a true democracy the minority can never dictate to the majority what they can and cannot do. So when we gather, we sing and we pray.”

In light of the history of South Africa, where for so long the minority dictated to the majority what they could and couldn’t do, it made perfect sense. How different things are here in the States!
Part of the wonder of this experience was to hear the thoughts and life lesson through my boys. My oldest son, Victor, who was ten years old at the time, describes some of the things he learned in his friendship with a boy named, Netshi, Pastor Farisani’s great-nephew who spent a lot of time with us when we stayed at the Church Center Beuster:

“I realized how much of being kind and making friends is through actions and attitudes, not just words. We were able to get along and have fun, even though all he could say in English was ‘faster’, and he didn’t know what it meant. I had heard that both of his parents had died of AIDS, but that didn’t even show in his kindness and playful spirit. I think that was a major revelation to me of how to treat people, and what true joy is even after so much pain.”

We returned home from South Africa inspired in so many ways. Seeing the work of the gospel so powerfully at work in the shaping of a new nation renewed my faith not only in the relevance of Christ in our personal lives and salvation, but also in its power to stand toe to toe with the powers of hatred and prevail in communities and nations. Politically, I was energized by the hope of a young, free nation. South Africa faces monumental challenges – the residual legacy of Apartheid, a 24-27% HIV/AIDS infection rate, high unemployment, and severe poverty. Yet in the midst of these crises, there are slogans and principles which are guiding this young, reborn nation. “South Africa belongs to all who live in her, regardless of race or social status.” The leadership is still confronted by the demands of those who hunger for revenge against white South Africans and decry the inequitable distribution of wealth where whites still control so much of the nation’s resources and best paying jobs. Yet the leaders I met live by the commitment that they will not become a new generation of oppressors, but instead will govern and enforce the laws of the land with as much equity and justice as humanly possible. Long before our President Obama’s campaign of hope, I experienced in South Africa the power and energy of a nation that still believes in its values and structures—a nation that has not grown cynical, but still believes in the promise of a better future.

National Clergy Renewal Program –
Phase Three: Congregational Renewal Event

The final part of the Clergy Renewal Program was to allow our congregation to be personally involved in my renewal experience by bringing Pastor Farisani, along with his wife and son, to Salem to lead a weekend of workshops and preaching which was open to the whole community.

Over the last ten years, our congregation has been blessed by the opportunity to host well-known Christian leaders like Tony Campolo, Martin Marty, and Millard
Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity. Though these men were definitely inspiring to the congregation, I have never seen someone step into our pulpit and capture the hearts of our congregation as Pastor Farisani. He told of his tortures and imprisonment; he told the stories of God’s power at work rescuing, freeing, confounding enemies of the truth, saving his life and that of his family. Again and again, he and Reginah shared stories of how their favorite passage of Scripture was fulfilled and experienced time and again — “And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28). From a poor pastor to the second highest political officer in his province; from prisoner to honored guest. This man and his family have endured so much and yet have emerged so filled with love and grace, with good will and humor, and with a passionate desire to reconcile in the name and presence of Jesus.

When I introduced Pastor Farisani to our congregation, I retold a story Pastor Farisani had shared with me and my family on location in South Africa. He had taken us to a small house on the outskirts of the town where he was raised. He introduced us to an old white woman, a widow, who lived alone in a small farm house on what was once a prosperous plantation. He told us of his first job, working for this woman’s late husband. The man was cruel, a beast. One day in his anger he struck Farisani over the head with a large wrench, leaving him writhing on the ground, moving in and out of consciousness for hours. This woman, who was the man’s wife, pleaded with him. “My God, you’ve killed him! Take him to the doctor! Please!” The man rebuked her, “I do not take baboons to doctors,” he declared. When he left, this woman tended to the seventeen-year-old, gave him all the money she had, and helped him flee, literally for his life. In life-long gratitude, Pastor Farisani continues to look after this old woman in her need. When I had told the story, I said to the congregation, trying to contain my own emotions, “This man who was once called a baboon has taught me more about what it means to be a human being, what it means to be a Christian, than any other person I have ever known.”

As Pastor Farisani preached the Word of God and shared his story, our congregation was moved, convicted, and inspired in a way that I have never seen in the now thirteen years that I have served them.

National Clergy Renewal Program – The Results

I believe I have already shared enough to give a glimpse at what this experience has meant to me and my family, but I would like to share the continuing blessing that has grown from our congregation’s participation in the program. As a direct result of the congregation’s renewal experience and the opportunity they had to meet Pastor Farisani, a movement grew within the church to send a team to South Africa to help Pastor Farisani renovate the Church Center Beuster.
the trip was announced, forty-three people volunteered to go. The organizers had already prayerfully discussed the maximum size the group could be and felt convinced that logistically we could only accommodate a team of twenty. We held a meeting, confronted everyone with the cost (approximately $3,500 per person) and the fact that we would not be doing congregational fund raising for the trip. The leaders and I thought these announcements would discourage some. It didn’t. We finally announced our strategy, and the group approved. We would pray, then draw names from a hat (our Biblical precedence for this is from Acts, chapter one). In the summer of 2007, twenty of us flew to South Africa. I cannot describe what it was like to share so many of the adventures that my family and I had been blessed by with so many more of my friends in Christ. There are still plans being discussed to send another team, possibly in 2010.

In addition, last summer in 2008, my wife Brenda and her mother led a group of seven women back to the Church Center Beuster to teach quilting to the women of the community. Brenda’s mother, Carrie LeMaster, organized the team which raised funds, secured the purchase of ten heavy duty sewing machines, and spent two weeks teaching twenty women from around the Church Center to quilt. Many of the women are now using the machines and the skills they learned to produce and sell quilts, chair cushions, clothing, table cloths and bags to provide for the needs of their families. They have blueprints to construct a center on the Church Center Beuster campus that will house a small shop as well as storage and room to sew and teach others. The money for materials has been raised by people throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana.

In total, so far, as a result of our congregation’s involvement in the National Clergy Renewal Program, thirty-one people have had the opportunity to travel to South Africa to learn, serve, and witness to the love of Christ that breaks down every barrier of race, class, and culture. In addition to the cost of the travel, our congregation has given more than $20,000 to support the ministry of the Church Center Beuster.

On a personal note, during our Sabbatical experience, my family and I were so aware of the blessing and privilege we were being given to learn, experience, and enjoy things that we quite literally could never have afforded. During the last year and a half the our experience in the NCR program has taken on even deeper meaning in our lives. On Christmas Eve, 2007, I was diagnosed with carcinoid cancer. Three days later I underwent major surgery and learned that the cancer had spread well into my lymph nodes. Although at this point my prognosis is good, the sobering reality of what I call a ‘mortality reminder’ brought into sharper focus the gift that the NCR program gave to me and my family. We don’t know what the future will hold, but we will forever look back with wonder and thanksgiving on the amazing adventures we shared as a family, thanking God for making this possible through the National Clergy Renewal Program.