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“The Word Became Flesh,” An Example of Incarnational Ministry: The Norwegian Settlers Church, Port Shepstone, South Africa

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**"THE WORD BECAME FLESH," AN EXAMPLE OF INCARNATIONAL
MINISTRY: THE NORWEGIAN SETTLERS CHURCH,
PORT SHEPSTONE, SOUTH AFRICA**

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John Easterling

abstract

The Norwegian Settlers Church in Port Shepstone, South Africa, is a remarkable testimony of God's faithfulness to His body. Starting as an ethnic immigrant's church, this fellowship faced many struggles and hardships, including lacking a resident pastor for much of its history. In 1986, God brought Pastor Ernest Hack, whose solid Biblical teaching helped to rebuild the base. In 1995, God led Trevor Downham to reach out to the area's many young people and to refocus outreach towards community transformation. John Easterling spent time in 2009 and 2010 interviewing and fellowshiping with members of this body as well as researching the area.

a brief history of norwegian settlement in south africa

The temptation of free passage from London and reasonably priced land prompted Captain Landmark, master of the missions ship *Elieser*, to recruit thirty-four families to immigrate to the Natal Coast of South Africa. Most Norwegians left their harsh conditions for America, creating a period of time with more Norwegians in the Upper Midwest of the United States than in Norway. These select, brave men, women, and children, though, left their beloved land to

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seek their fortune in a new and promising land. The group included a variety of professions—ten farmers, craftsmen with skills ranging from cabinet making to book binding and gardening, an agricultural expert, and a Lutheran pastor.¹ The group of 233 people set out in faith to find a better life in Africa. The long voyage passed through England, the Canary Islands, and eventually stopped in major cities in coastal Africa before finally landing at Durban.² The trip was hard and resulted in young children, including a newborn infant, dying and being buried at sea en route.³

Leaving Durban, the group took a steamer one hundred miles to the mouth of the Umzimkulu River to an area known as Port Shepstone, where they were to settle. They were greeted by 400 Zulus in full regalia, giving them a war dance—a sight that terrified the new arrivals. The grass huts of Port Shepstone were not very inviting. Their future homes suffered from an incursion of weeds and climbing plants growing out of the crude dirt floor that was covered with frogs, wasp nests, and even snake skins. Although there was work to be done, the settlers quickly started fires and found refreshment in some coffee.⁴ They were home.

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The early years of African life was hard for the settlers due to their isolation. Originally there were no stores, shops, or any businesses at all, and everything had to be brought in by boat. The steamer ride to Durban and back took several days. Several years later, a hall attached to the church became a schoolhouse for the children. For decades, the schoolhouse served the community, teaching a full range of subjects including the Norwegian language. This way of life would continue for nineteen years, until a railroad connected the Port Shepstone area with Durban. While waiting for the arrival of the slow-coming railroad, the Norwegian community invested in the construction of their own boat for fishing in the water teeming with a tremendous variety of fish. This proved to be very important in the early years to provide a good, healthy variety to their diet. Although the Norwegian community worked together trying to tame the land, the South African colonial government reminded this group of newcomers that they should cooperate with those from England and Germany as well if they were to consider themselves as Natal colonists rather than Norwegian settlers.⁵

The settlers sought to farm the one hundred acre farmland, but the poor soil produced a very limited variety of crops. The original settlers became disenchanted

¹ Andrew and Anna Halland and Ingeborg Kjørnstad, translr. A. H. E. Andreassen, "The Norwegian Settlers in Natal 1882" (*South Coast Herald*, Pty., Ltd., Port Shepstone, Natal: 1932), 10.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 9–11.

³ Email sent by Bev King for Mary Neethling, September 27, 2010.

⁴ Halland and Kjørnstad, "The Norwegian Settlers," pp. 16–17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–27.

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with their new land, often abandoning their new home. Five families turned

around in a short while and headed back to their homeland. Three more families soon followed. In Witzieshoek, in the Orange Free State, some men cut down trees and built a small boat that was then transported five hundred kilometers, traveling over mountains in an ox wagon, to the sea.⁶ The small craft was only twenty feet long, and it sailed all the way to England. The lure of the cities of Durban and Johannesburg also drew away nine families. The gold and diamond mines often pulled men away to earn money to help their families in Port Shepstone. Later on, a few more returned to Scandinavia, and others decided to immigrate to Australia. The remnant of the Norwegian settlers community continued on regardless of the depletion of their number;⁷ they worked at growing semi-tropical fruit such as oranges, cultivating grapes, and adding livestock such as poultry and cattle to their farms.⁸

Although the "Norwegian" heritage was central to the community, the people became South African also. They joined with the English in the Boer War in 1899–1901 and suffered some losses during the Boer uprising during WWI. In WWII, their men served in North Africa and Italy.⁹

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the norwegian settlers church history

Shortly after immigrating, the settlers had used a high point in Marburg, an area of their one hundred acre plot of land, to erect a church, built even before the settlers built their homes. This location was prominently visible in the region. The Rev. E. Burg served the church from the beginning, until funds ran out. He moved to Johannesburg in 1892, to provide for his large family. The Marburg German Mission, the Brethren Mission of Cape Town, and others helped serve the church over the next twenty years. As the children of the church moved to Durban and Johannesburg for employment, the church continued to serve the diminishing Norwegian community in Port Shepstone. A minister from Durban, Reverend Ericksen, served the church on a monthly basis, and a lay preacher, Mr. O. Valdal, served from 1911 until his death in 1931.¹⁰ For over forty years of the church's history, there were no full-time pastors; the congregation relied on the assistance of both lay and visiting preachers to fill the pulpits.¹¹

⁶ Email sent by Bev King for Mary Neethling, September 27, 2010.

⁷ Halland and Kjørnstad, "The Norwegian Settlers," pp. 44, 62–63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–31.

¹¹ Oral history interview with Mary Neethling, June 8, 2010, at Norwegian Settler's Church.

In the early years, the church both served the descendants of the original Norwegian immigrants and had a vision for reaching the lost. Three individuals from the church, Peter Aage Rodseth, Dorthea Tvedt, and Johannes C. Nero, served with the Norwegian Mission in Zululand. The church supported the Seaman's Mission, a children's home in Durban, and other ministries.¹² The mission of the church often focused on moving across cultures to those who had not yet heard the Good News, but it generally did not penetrate and transform their local community.¹³

In the 1960s, the church family was becoming more and more identified with their new homeland. With the use of English in their homes and businesses, the ethnic draw of the church lost its strength. Only about fifty to sixty people, with less than a dozen children, continued to attend. Within a decade, the numbers dwindled to fewer than ten in attendance due to the lack of a resident pastor—the visiting pastors from Methodist and Baptist churches were barely keeping the doors open. By this time, the church had moved away from the official ties to the Lutheran church and had become an evangelical fellowship.¹⁴ The church continued to keep its doors open, but it struggled to minister to an aging community.

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In 1986, Pastor Ernest Hack arrived in the church. His mother was a descendant of the original settlers, giving him a natural tie to the congregation. He was a strong Bible teacher, having attended a Bible college in Columbia, South Carolina. Through his ministry, the church grew from the handful of the faithful to an average of sixty in attendance, drawing from the English-speaking community. The congregation grew, and one day when they had a baptism, they reached 120. So that they could add extra chairs when needed, the church broke open the back wall of the old sanctuary to create an archway between the sanctuary and the fellowship hall.¹⁵ Hack's ministry came to an end just after the elections in May 1994, when he chose to take his family back to America for his children to attend Christian schools. He also believed that it was time for another man to take leadership in the pulpit to help the church move further along.¹⁶

pastor trevor's vision and the birth of new ministries

In 1995, Trevor Downham and his wife, Helene, came as the pastoral team from the nearby Margate Baptist Church. Congregants over the age of sixty comprised

¹² Halland and Kjornstad, "The Norwegian Settlers," 108–9, 127–9.

¹³ Neething, oral history.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Email sent by Ernie Hack, September 25, 2010.

¹⁶ Interview with Ernest Hack, September 24, 2010.

Easterling: "The Word Became Flesh," An Example of Incarnational Ministry: The eighty percent of his congregation. Only ten children attended the church. He chose not to approach change quickly but to wait patiently on God to direct and to lead His ministry. Having a background as the youth pastor in his former church, he was given the freedom by the church board to minister to youth in the general community. He went into seventeen different schools over his first five years as pastor and found an open and receptive audience to his message. The one-hundred seat chapel soon became too small as the church experienced growth under Trevor's leadership. Reversing the seating in the century-old building allowed the original school rooms to be used for worship. In addition, the church museum also became an annex to the auditorium. Within a few years, Trevor and the council realized that the church was too small for the growing congregation. They contracted an architect to design a new worship center, classrooms, offices, and other needed facilities. The church approved the plans, and the paperwork process began to receive proper approvals for their building.

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Trevor led the church in a massive construction project that included an auditorium for over six hundred people. The men and women of the church, particularly the original members, though advanced in years, worked hard to put up this new facility. Simultaneously, the church continued to grow. One hot day saw a record number of 240 people crowd into the old chapel, old school room, and church museum. Two women fainted. The following Sunday, three hundred worshippers moved into the unfinished structure. It was without windows or a completed roof. The church continued to grow,¹⁷ and in 1999, the building was completed. The church council, elders and deacons, and the ever-increasing number of volunteers working together not only made the construction of the building possible, but also expanded the foundation of church leadership, a necessary step for a strong, growing church.

Trevor continued to see God's blessing. Responding to the serious needs of a friend in 2001, he went to Johannesburg to donate a kidney, and then spent a time away from his ministry to recuperate and recover from the surgery. During this time of rest, Trevor had a divine vision over the span of two days that showed the future growth of the church. The vision was detailed and included actual measurements for an even larger facility to house three thousand worshippers. However, Trevor had doubts about such a large facility and argued in the vision to build a little smaller chapel with only twenty-five hundred seats. Trevor was unsure of how to share this vision with others, if indeed it was from God. He brought it first to a small group, but as the circle enlarged, the vision was well received.

¹⁷ Neething, oral history.

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In 2008, construction started on the new addition. The construction was projected to take several years to build the entire facility; the church continues to build as finances are available. The amazing detail of Trevor's vision was that he did not see himself in the pulpit, but someone else in his place. Today, Trevor continues to lead the church ahead, though he believes there will be another pastor to lead the church in the future.¹⁸

the message that rocked the church

Before Trevor's hospitalization, he was approached by a church family with a brother who was dying from AIDS. Moving out of his comfort zone, Trevor and his wife befriended Craig. Trevor shared the love of Christ, but he also cared for Craig as though they were brothers. Trevor was with him when he took his last, painful breath. Trevor was deeply affected. Once, a man who was dying from AIDS was found on a trash heap. Pastor Trevor and Helene took the man in, and together with the church family, they tenderly loved and cared for him for eighteen months until the day when God called him home. Late in April of 2002, a man walked from his home and died on the steps of the church, because he did not want to die on a trash heap. Trevor and the church were broken.¹⁹ God had to break the spiritual hearts of Trevor and the church family to see the suffering and dying on their doorstep, showing the body that He had a greater direction for them and the one hundred acres that they had sat on for a century.

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Following the death of the man on the church steps, Trevor brought a challenge to his congregation. He asked, "If Norwegian Settlers Church were to close our doors today, how long would it take for the community to notice?" He went on to challenge his listeners, "We can make a difference; this must never happen again! WE MUST make a difference in this world to help others to transform hearts and lives in the name of Jesus Christ!"

It didn't take long for changes to happen, and the church started to move outside the walls of the building into a hurting local community, where HIV/AIDS infected and affected people living in rural suburbs.²⁰ That became the church's

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview with Trevor Downham, June 10, 2010.

²⁰ In the early 1980s, the world became aware of a deadly disease that has turned into the death sentence of many in this world. South Africa is particularly hard hit, with 17.5 percent of the adult population infected, not including children and infants. Taken from an official South African government website, this statistic seems to have been deflated in order to boast a healthy façade. Port Shepstone is in the state of Kwazulu-Natal where the infection rate is a strong 38.7 percent—nearly 40 percent of the adults are infected. A Southern Baptist missionary working among the Zulu in Murchison (a short ten minute drive from the Norwegian Settler's Church) has worked with physicians in the area who believe that the statistics in the region based on patient/hospital contact to be nearly 70 percent. The population is devastated; nearly all those in their 30s and 40s are dead. The needs are incredible. A TEAM missionary commented in his prayer letter that all their churches among the Zulus have AIDS committees.

Easterling: "The Word Became Flesh," An Example of Incarnational Ministry: The starting point. This led to establishing a ministry known today as the Genesis

Trust. Their mission statement reads: "As followers of Christ, we serve our communities holistically, meeting physical, social, and spiritual needs associated with HIV/AIDS, poverty, and other social issues."²¹

Overcrowded hospitals for the dying led to the opening in May 2005 of the first twenty-bed ward, the start of the Care Center, an AIDS hospice. A second ward was added in 2007. Plans for a third building focused on infants and children with HIV/AIDS have been started. Current facilities include testing, counseling, food, laundry, and even a chapel. The Care Center was built without help from the South African government but was paid for by generous individuals and partner churches in the United States. The Care Center has been well established and successful with good nutrition, proper medication, appropriate rehabilitation, prayer, encouragement, and loving care. Upwards of thirty percent often return home for a time to be with their family as a result of their renewed physical strength. Many times, the Care Center gives the last human embrace and prayers before a person faces eternity.

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Ongoing funding for the Care Center is well beyond what the local church can provide. The center benefits from some South African government help, together with President Bush's faith-based initiative to sustain the Care Center. As a consequence of the latter funds not being renewed, the center began seeking sponsors for the beds, a cost of twenty dollars per patient per night. The Care Center has become a ministry of global significance.²² Dr. Mike Nash, a personal physician to President Bush, voluntarily served the Care Center for three years.

At the time of the Care Center opening, a group of parents in the adjoining economically depressed "Coloured" community of Merlewood asked the church if something could be done for the kids in the community. The church started a gym ministry and began to make a significant imprint on the people. Nearly a thousand youth passed through the doors of the gym, with several hundred coming to Christ from 2005 to 2008. The gym program touched the lives in Umkholmbe, a Zulu squatter's camp as well. It became a contextualized church for Zulu men who otherwise never went to church.²³

The Khula Community Project is in a poor, rural area in Eziqoleni called Mahlathini. It is a response to the number of children in the Mahlathini area without parents, food, clothing, and homes. Largely as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Khula was established in 2006 as an after-school feeding program for

²¹ Genesis Church. "Genesis Mission Statement." <http://genesishope.co.za> (accessed August, 2010).

²² Interview with Sharon Jones, Care Center Manager, June 11, 2010.

²³ Interview with Helene Downham, June 10, 2010.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 9 children, a day care (crèche) for babies and toddlers, and a community vegetable garden. Khula started with feeding thirteen children, and grew to over seventy children receiving a meal five days a week! The day care started with six children, and has subsequently grown to more than forty children under the age of six. Khula's vision has been to provide wider social, educational, and health programs for the children, and to assist the community access healthcare and income-generating opportunities.²⁴

In 1999, a second gym ministry was established in the Zulu community of Murchison, an area with one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world. The Rev. Steve Filppo, a trained and experienced youth and athletic ministry worker with the IMB (Southern Baptists), has worked closely within the Murchison gym and sports ministry for a couple of years, overseeing the development of a well-equipped weight lifting gym and also in the building of an outside basketball court. Evangelistic Bible studies were created as a routine each day for those who came to exercise. In 1999, two young men, Boyze and Wiseman, both committed their lives to Christ and have been working at the gym.²⁵

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The Murchison gym was formed as part of the Murchison Community Center. It grew to have many ministries, including reaching many children of Murchison with afternoon sports activities for school-aged children, an after school reading and homework room, community vegetable gardens, a music academy, skills/crafts development, HIV and AIDS testing, counseling services, and other outreach projects.²⁶

other ministries

While the church has worked with its expanding physical plant and growing ministries, it has also striven to touch the needs of its community, including reaching out to the many youth. A program called Youthworx was started. It has a center in nearby Shelly Beach to "provide a safe alternative facility for teenagers and young adults that offers both entertainment as well as access to life changing resources, thereby inspiring them to become a future generation with Godly integrity."²⁷

Having built the church along the southern coast of South Africa, a place for holidays from Johannesburg, a university is absent. Rather than seeing all of their

²⁴ Genesis Church. "Khula Projects." http://genesishope.co.za/khula_projects (accessed August, 2010)

²⁵ Interview with Steve Filppo, June 9, 2010.

²⁶ Genesis Church. "Murchison Community Centre." http://genesishope.co.za/murchison_community_centre (accessed August, 2010).

²⁷ Genesis Church. "Youthworx." <http://genesishope.co.za/youthworx> (accessed August 2010).

Easterling: "The Word Became Flesh," An Example of Incarnational Ministry: Th young adults leave the church and possibly never return, the church established a program called "Becomers." Young adults in the church have chosen to do their studies with UNISA (the University of South Africa in Pretoria), a university with a strong distance learning program. The students are given housing on the campus of the church or in apartments located at the Youthworx facility. College classes happen in the morning and working in different ministries in the church takes place in the afternoons. This program has added to the leadership team and the ongoing growth of the church.

In 2005, Paul Flannigan, a professional rugby player, shared a vision with Pastor Trevor to use rugby as a medium for ministry. The result was the start of the Vikings Rugby Academy, a program for those, ages eighteen to twenty-four, who want a career in rugby, either as players or as coaches. The program can lead to a degree in sports science when combined with further university training. The rigorous program has been endorsed by Rugby Union and Sharks Academy. The participants are not just from South Africa, and there are some of other faiths. Flannigan and his team are firmly making Jesus Christ center in the academy. The one-, two-, or three-year programs were created to be demanding and cost a hefty thirty-four thousand Rand per year, of which most is paid for by parents or via sponsorships organized through the church. This is another unique ministry that has spun off of the Norwegian Settlers Church.²⁸

Future projects in mind have included the possibility of building some houses on the grounds for retired missionaries, pastors, and Christian workers. Other needs are more pressing and have prevented advancement toward this goal. These houses would meet a real need in South Africa. Pastor Trevor has also had the vision that perhaps someday, Norwegian Settlers Church will send missionaries back to Norway.²⁹

The growth in this church has been unmistakable.³⁰ Port Shepstone has not been known as a dynamically growing area but rather as a holiday region among the white population, one well-advanced with the AIDS epidemic.³¹ The nature of

²⁸ Interview with Petro Minnie, June 9, 2010.

²⁹ Downham interview, June 10, 2010.

³⁰ During the course of the interviews with Trevor and Helene Downham and the oral history interpretation of Mary Neethling, the subject of phenomenal growth was echoed by each person. There was a church growth study team that came from Johannesburg to study the reasons for the growth. They didn't find the "homogeneous principle" was applicable. In fact, the team could not explain in human terms the reasons for the church growth, but pointed to God's hand in this. Trevor and the leadership are well aware of the pitfalls and problems in moving from a large to a mega church and are working with partner churches in the United States.

³¹ Multiple factors contribute to promoting the AIDS epidemic, especially among the Zulu population. (1) The years of Apartheid separated families from husbands who lived in the townships. Often, they fell victim to loneliness and became unfaithful to their family in the homelands. AIDS was spread through prostitution and then back to the homelands. (2) In Zulu culture, women have been culturally brought up to not refuse men and their advances. Schools have sought to overcome this with teaching, but with little results. (3) In addition, the Zulu culture is bombarded with Western influences, including promiscuous youth and couples deciding to "live together" without the bonds of holy matrimony. (4) Still

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the church staff and the sacrificial work that all of the staff members, pastors, secretaries, and youth workers have done have been factors for God's outpouring and blessing on the church.³² Still, not everything can always be explained. However, this much is clear: in 2002 the pastor and his congregation came to realize that God had placed them uniquely where they are for such a time as this, and they have confidently responded to God's charge to be a dynamic, growing, incarnational ministry in Port Shepstone, South Africa.

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another factor advancing the spread of AIDS would be unfounded belief that a man with AIDS would be cured by sleeping with a virgin. (5) Some might argue that traditional Zulu family practices such as men waiting for marriage until a mature age and paying a bride price called Lobolo is also a reason. However, Lobolo is a centuries' old tradition and has worked for hundreds if not thousands of years in many Bantu cultures. Traditionally, Lobolo among the Zulu is eleven cows or thirty-three thousand Rand, but in reality, the price is negotiable according to individual circumstances and other factors. Lobolo is rarely paid by the groom and his family alone, but by his extended family. When men reached a mature age in their early 30s, and a bride was chosen, the extended family showed their approval by contributing to the bride price. Younger men were generally not considered mature enough for marriage. Young men who were not willing to wait often ended up living for a time with multiple women and having children out of wedlock. The lack of respect in such relationships often contributed to promiscuity, followed by the introduction of HIV/AIDS. Some have argued that to eliminate Lobolo would allow younger men to marry, but this would probably add to potential promiscuity. A man who paid eleven cows for his wife would have respect for his wife and would possibly be more committed to that exclusive relationship than one who had not paid so dearly for his wife. Zulu churches often show their support of the system of Lobolo, for they know that strong marriages require both commitment and sacrifice—both of which are lost in much of the current generation. The governments have advanced the ABCs of preventing the spread: A means abstinence, B means be faithful to your partner, and C means to use condoms. Unfortunately, much of the government campaign has aimed only at the latter without much success. Southern Africa is suffering from this terrible epidemic, leaving millions of children without parents, taking the lives of large segments of the population, and leaving social and economic devastation. This material was gathered by interviewing English South Africans, Afrikaners, Zulus, Coloreds, Indians, and both American and Canadian missionaries serving in South Africa.

³² Email sent by Bev King for Trevor Downham, September 12, 2010.