



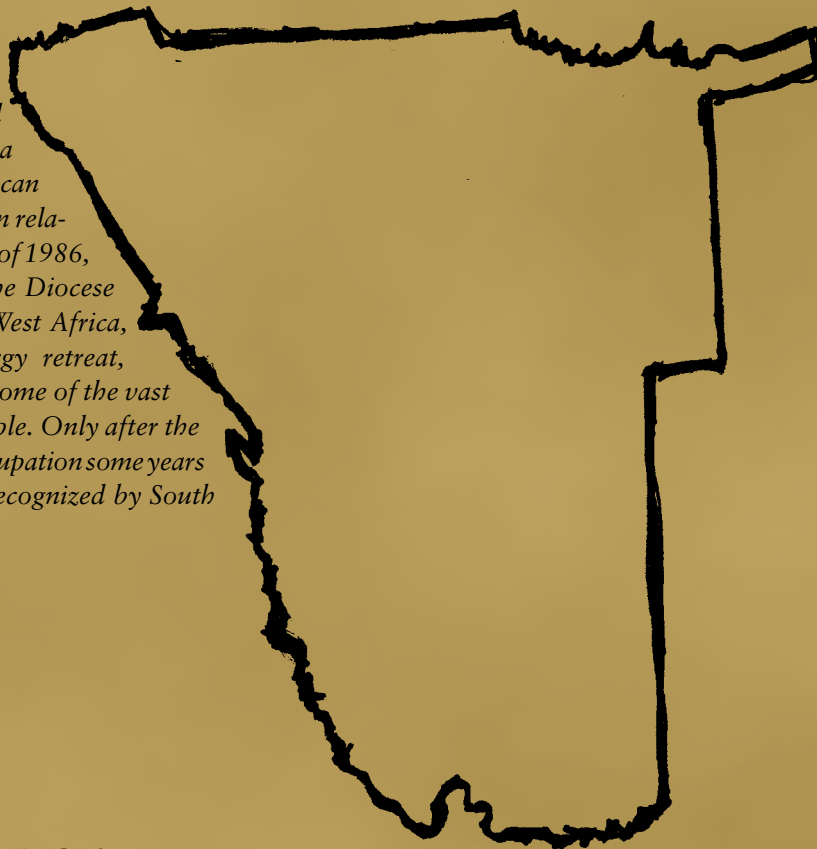
NAMIBIA  
REFLECTIONS ON TENDER TENDING MYSTERY

RON DELBENE

For a period of six years from 1981 to 1987, the Diocese of Alabama and the Diocese of Namibia were united in an Anglican Communion companion relationship. In the late Fall of 1986, I was invited to visit the Diocese of Namibia, in South West Africa, to preach, lead a clergy retreat, and travel throughout some of the vast diocese visiting the people. Only after the end of South African occupation some years later was the country recognized by South Africa as Namibia.

#### NEW WORK

Churning, yearning,  
conjuring, contracting,  
the words within me  
tumble up and over  
and into sound emerging  
from my wombmouth birthed.



#### OHANDI MU KUNDU

Sunday, November 2, 1986  
Cathedral of St. George, Windhoek

*Ohandi mu kundu nombili mu Jesus Kristus!*  
*Groute en vrede aan u in Jesus Kristus!*  
Greetings and peace to you in Christ Jesus!

The three languages of the church in Namibia (Kwanyama, Afrikaans, English) help celebrate the Dean's installation.

Several weeks before leaving the states, Roger, the newly elected Dean of the Cathedral, asked me to preach at his installation and it was a surprising honor, and this morning was an experience of cosmic proportions for me.

The tiny cathedral was packed. A screen for video transmission had been set up in the parish hall, and that room was also packed. Some of the congregation—blacks, whites, and coloreds—had traveled for days to be present. A church under siege by the government, a white South African elected as Dean, an Ovambo tribesman first-generation-Christian Bishop wearing his leopard skin miter and cope were all realities that seemed to envelope me as I stood to speak a multilingual greeting.

The diversity of the people present heightened the paradox of a church proclaiming as united those same people that the society legally declares separate. It is one thing to read about apartheid, and another to see it played “on its home court.”

## REACTION

The gut growl calls  
the earth to attention.  
All listen for the  
discerning word.

BANG!

Bang!  
and the tinker-toy story  
fades in exploring  
the thought forces  
of my past,  
and my story  
is now  
my experience  
in the midst of the present.

## INSIGHT

Calling  
catching  
creating  
collating  
celebrating  
with perspective unique.

## LIBERATION

Monday, November 3, 1986  
Ai Gams Retreat Center, Klein Windhoek

This afternoon I understood liberation theology in a way I have never even imagined. In the midst of the afternoon time of the retreat for the priests here in Namibia (about 30 of us) I decided to do the experience of the story we usually call “The Good Samaritan.”

*For the past fifteen years of giving retreats and conferences throughout the United States I have shared this story experience with all kinds of people. They are asked to listen to the story and see with which character in the story they most identify. Since the story will be read three times with brief pauses between the readings, they often find that their experience changes as to which of the characters they most feel an affinity.*

*After the exercise, people group in triads and talk about which character they identified with and why. Volunteers representing each of the characters are then asked to do a tableau indicating by body positions their action in the story. Seeing all the characters involved at one time has proven to be a moving experience for the participants. At the end of what tends to be a period of 45 minutes, I ask, "Who is the Christ figure in the story?" Always the answer is immediate and said in unison: THE SAMARITAN!*

There was great enthusiasm for this kind of experience in looking at the Scripture. In fact, for all but one of the priests, this was their first experience of entering into the scripture in this way. There was much conversation and laughter, and the tableau was animated and powerful. When I asked the question: Who is the Christ figure in the story? The answer was again immediate and in unison . . . THE BEATEN ONE!

Then the conversation exploded as they shared how they saw this story in a new way. They spoke about how the official church had passed them by, how the government and education had passed them by, and how they had to stop, pick themselves up and care of themselves, since no one else was there to do it for them.

The Christ figure was the beaten one. They were the beaten ones. Their people were the beaten ones. Christ was their people. Christ was them. The identification was overwhelming for me. I stood there full of awe as thoughts and learnings and readings about liberation theology and radical gospel raced through my mind. I remember so clearly saying to myself “My God, this is liberation theology enfleshed!”

### MY JOURNEY PRAYER

Let me tread lightly  
upon the pages of my life  
so my prints  
will be readable  
for generations  
coming along  
wondering  
what I was thinking  
when I walked the journey  
to its eventual  
beginning.

### TRUTH

Tender tending mystery  
she moves swiftly, silently  
in shadows and in sunlight  
to whisper good news to all  
who listen at the door  
for salvation overheard.

Good news  
is so better caught  
from overheard words  
on grounded walking paths,  
than the bulletins made bored  
on honking travelled highways.



### OSHIFIMA

Wednesday, November 5, 1986  
Ai Gams Retreat Center, Klein Windhoek

What an eye-opener this evening. After my reflection on liturgy and ritual, we were sitting around talking about how we strive to unite both the everyday experience of people and the deeper understanding of our place in the global celebration of liberation and that which was yet to come. One young priest said: “If we really believe that what we do in Eucharist is express the everyday experiences of our people, why do we use wafers made by some nuns in England?” There was immediate silence and I saw the young-old, traditional-radical, split on the faces of the clergy. With a hint of condescension and irritation in his voice, one of the distinguished elder priests said: “Let’s not attack those things which are sacred to our people.”

With a frustrated sigh, the young priest responded: “We teach them that we are a traveling people, traveling to freedom with Jesus. Why do we not use *oshifima*, our own traveling bread? All of our mothers have made it for us to take when we went out for weeks watching the goats. It does not mold on our journey and sustains us until we come home again. Is that not what we should use at our altar? Is that not our bread of life?”

## DISCOVERY

Today I caught  
my inner  
tumbling tumbleweed  
and rolled a ride  
across a desert  
wild with color  
and moist  
with tears.

## PRESENCE

The story's words  
collapse time-space.  
The breath of God  
blows over the present.

## ONE BY ONE

We gather stones  
as footsteps  
through the rivers  
of our Jordans.



## OVAMBO LAND

Saturday, November 8, 1986.

I'm seeing Africa with dust and sand on my teeth and in my nostrils. It's quite different than sitting in an air-conditioned theater and watching *Out of Africa*.

Driving through the sand this morning I saw a pile of stones along the road. I was startled by them and said :”Why are these stones here?” Suddenly, time and place collapsed and I was with Joshua and the people who had just built their gilgal on the shore of the River Jordan. It was an enfleshment of the Scripture that will forever change the way I celebrate that story.

In Namibia tonight, walking in the dusk with the pink-painted sky in front of me, I think of Montana, the “Big Sky Country.” Do we always limit the unknown by what we know? I remember a time when I didn't ever know where Namibia was on the map. How little I know of what lies under God's vault on the earth!

Do I sit in the theater of life and watch Christianity on a screen? When does the Word of God permeate my being as the dust does from a day in the bush? Is the good news on my teeth and in my nostrils?

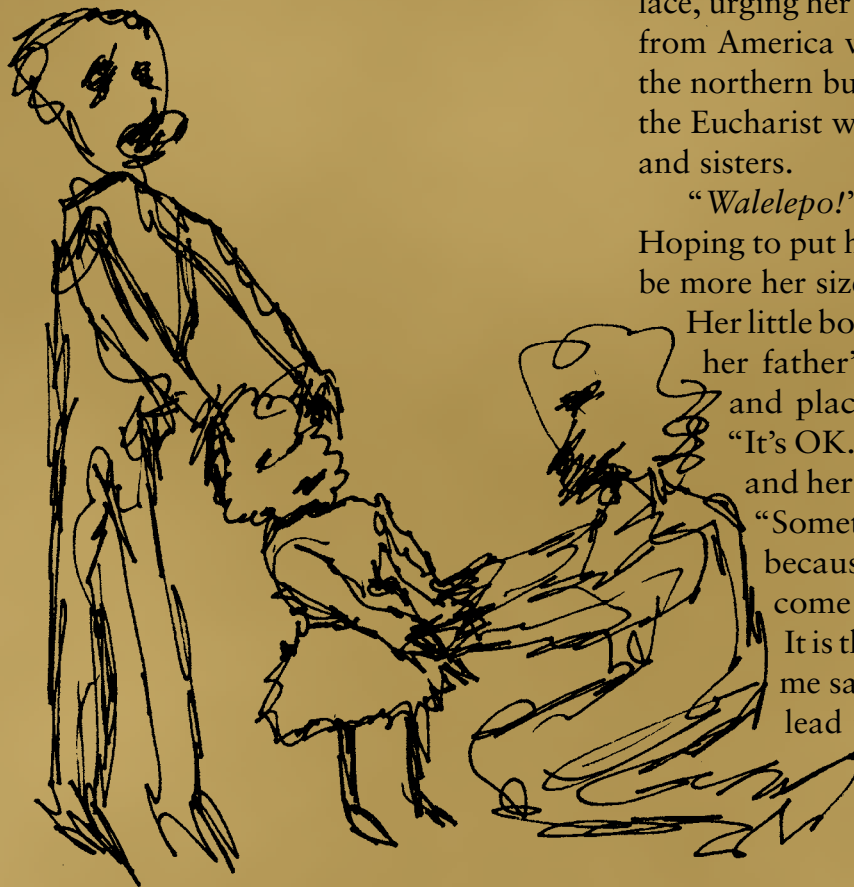
## LET FREEDOM RING

Stomping as the warrior  
in the blood of violation  
“No, no more, never again”  
spews out for all to hear.

I stand in freedom’s ring  
at the crack of my garden gate.  
Speak gently as you knock and ask  
for my “yes” to enter in.

## UNION

Receive,  
Rejoice,  
All is one.  
A little child am I, O God.  
Anamnesis–Doxa!



## WALELEPO!

Sunday, November 9, 1986  
St. Thomas Church,  
Okathitu, near Angola

I can see the fear in the three-year-old’s eyes. Her small frail body shrinks from my presence. Her father places his hand at the back of her pink dress with white lace, urging her toward me – a white priest from America who has come 880km into the northern bush to preach and celebrate the Eucharist with my Namibian brothers and sisters.

“*Walelepo!*” I say: “Good Morning!” Hoping to put her at ease, I squat down to be more her size and extend my hand.

Her little body bolts backward against her father’s leg. He takes her hand and places it in mine as if to say, “It’s OK.” She touches it hesitantly and her father apologetically says “Sometimes she is little afraid because you are like men who come to torture us last weeks.”

It is then that a quiet voice inside me says, “And a little child will lead them.” Where is this little child leading me today?

## ANSWER

At this point in my life  
I believe.



Ron DelBene has been doing spiritual direction and leading programs in the areas of prayer, spirituality and personal development since 1963. Ron holds a Master's degree in Theology and a Doctor of Ministry in Spirituality and Organizational Systems. He has done additional postgraduate work in education, psychology, and counseling. He is an author, poet, artist and Episcopal priest. He was an assistant professor of theology, director of a campus ministry center, and national consultant in religion for an education division of CBS.

Since 1980, Ron's organizational system's leadership has been primarily in churches, empowering them in understanding their mission, goals and structure for effective and creative ministry. Ron and his spouse, Eleanor, reside in Trussville, Alabama, and have two grown children and two grandchildren.

## NOTES

Poems, journals, sketches and graphics by Ron DelBene.

<sup>1</sup> John Muafangejo, *Our God for All People*, lino-cut 18/150, 1981, private collection.

<sup>2</sup> John Muafangejo, *The Last Supper*, lino-cut 18/100, 1978, private collection.

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