

Chain of hope

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

During the years of apartheid in South Africa, most of the Methodist Church's involvement in education was halted by the government. Schools were closed, land was confiscated and obstacles to new efforts were set in place.

The apartheid government seemed to know just what a threat church-sponsored educational institutions could be. After all, Nelson Mandela was educated at Methodist institutions. Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress and the architect of the protests that led to the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, was educated at Methodist schools and was a Methodist lay preacher.

This summer, as my wife and I traveled through the new South Africa, we sensed the pain of Methodists as they talked about the struggles to reassert their commitment to education. We were taken to a beautiful place just outside Pretoria where the Methodists are establishing a theological college on a portion of land that once housed a much larger college. Now businesses, houses and even a police complex exist on what was formerly the church's land for education.

This tragic history has significantly weakened the Methodist Church's ability to provide much-needed education for South Africans as they seek a future unbound by the destructiveness of the past.

The Methodist Church does not have the finances or infrastructure to fully reestablish its engagement in higher education overnight, but it has taken bold and creative steps. Over the past several years, the church has started more than 60 preschools in churches in the Johannesburg area. The Methodists refer to this project as "a chain of hope."

Education is a commitment to hope for the future at any age. Clearly, preschools offer a sign of hope for the long-term future, even if they don't offer some of the most immediately needed training for rebuilding a nation. And they are a good place to start, if for no other reason than that it is far less expensive to establish preschools in churches than to find the land, the money and the infrastructure to

establish high schools, colleges or seminaries.

There are other reasons. In many settings the preschools allow single parents to look for jobs so they can provide their children with resources for a better life. Preschools also offer critically important nourishment, structure and social outlets for children who might otherwise experience the hopelessness that pervades communities racked by poverty, crime and AIDS.

My wife and I could feel the hopefulness in the preschools we visited. This was true wherever we went—whether in the large, multiethnic setting of downtown Johannesburg or in the impoverished township of Ivory Park where the people start a new preschool every time they begin a new congregation. We were moved by the vitality among the teachers, the excitement and warmth among the children. Children have such resilience and optimism that we couldn't help sensing their happiness and the possibilities for their future.

But if this commitment were dependent on childlike optimism, or even on our tendencies to sentimentalize the innocence of children, there would be little reason for hope. After all, one could not help noticing the bars on the windows of some of the schools, or the shacks in Ivory Park where children and their families live. Can these schools educate children in ways that at least acknowledge the larger pain, suffering and struggles in South Africa?

They are trying. In many congregations, preschools are part of larger visions of ministry that include programs designed to foster reconciliation, the healing of memories and economic development. The Methodist Church has developed curriculum for the "chain of hope" preschools that, in age-appropriate ways, helps children begin to acknowledge the importance of healing memories. The church is aware that even young children have been scarred by the past, and live in families and communities where that pain and suffering is palpable. Often the resilience and optimism of children can mask the wounds that, left untreated, make it increasingly difficult for those children to discover and renew hope as they grow toward adulthood.

Could it be that there is nothing as important for the future as the ways in which we educate and care for the youngest children—their souls as well as their minds and bodies? Do we tend to underestimate what children are capable of understanding, of needing, of experiencing?

While in South Africa, I was reading Toi Derricote's powerful memoir, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, a tale of growing up black in America. Derricote reflects on an elementary-age black child for whom hopelessness has already set in: "How did this happen? By first grade it is already too late, and in spite of her mother, who spent her maid's paycheck on a white pinafore so that Clarissa would fit in, she *doesn't* fit in, and her mother isn't strong enough to beat that devil out of her."

By first grade, it is already too late. Perhaps unshackling the chains of suffering and creating chains of hope will take longer and will be more difficult than we would like to think. But that work is a sign of authentic hope. After all, we follow someone who said, "Let the children come unto me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."