

Traveling companions: Friendships that challenge and sustain

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

As I sat in a South African retreat center, I was struck by the differences between the two church leaders who were speaking. One is a well-known retreat leader, a contemplative person who stresses the importance of the deep, inward journey of the soul with God. The other is a leader in the social witness against apartheid, an activist who stresses the importance of the church's wide mission of engagement in the world. These two friends and colleagues in ministry were talking with our group from the United States about Christian faith and life in South Africa.

Each had wonderful insights about the importance of the gospel for shaping lives, nurturing souls, resisting injustice and transforming communities. It was a memorable evening.

I was most struck, however, by how much these two colleagues had learned and were still learning from each other. The retreat leader, a gentle spirit whose life reflects his deep, inward journey with God, spoke about the importance of a wide engagement of social witness. He talked about how the retreats he has led became pilgrimages of pain and hope, drawing out the suffering and yearning of his participants while also leading them to places of pain and hope in the world. They have participated in ministry settings where they could see hope rising out of the pain and suffering of their land.

The leader in social witness told about his discovery that social witness cannot be long sustained apart from a prayerful inward journey of the soul with God. He talked about the centrality of prayer and worship, of Sabbath rest and renewal, for sustaining the focus necessary to resist injustice and transform communities.

Through their life and work, these leaders have learned the significance of becoming more than they thought they were. Each has had to move beyond his own temperaments, inclinations and passions in order to sustain himself faithfully and to appropriately fulfill the office of ministry in his time and place. Each had something

important to learn from the one who practiced ministry differently, even as he has challenged the other person to take his own primary focus more seriously.

Three factors have helped these men see the uniqueness and complexity of their callings and to live them out faithfully. First, they both share a conviction that the purpose of Christian ministry is to lead people into life with Jesus Christ in the kingdom of God. This sense of a *telos* has given them a focus and direction that has helped them learn to distinguish the important from the urgent, the life-giving and life-transforming character of a robust engagement with God from the distractions that burden us and distort our vision.

Second, they both understand ministry as an office to which they have been called. This office calls them to grow in the fullness of grace as they equip the saints for ministry in all of its variety. Rather than having simply a job or a profession, they have had a sense of obligation to live into the office to which the church had called them—even, at times, in spite of their own church's confusions about what that ought to mean in South Africa.

Third, their friendship has nurtured an appreciation for the other and a challenge to grow into the strengths of the other. Their differences have been a rich resource for each as both have sought discernment and growth in their lives. Their friendship was unlikely for a variety of reasons. They have different temperaments, inclinations and passions, different spiritual gifts and different ways of negotiating relationships and issues. Yet these differences are also what makes their relationship, and relationships like theirs, life-giving.

A few weeks ago I received a copy of the sabbatical report of a good friend who has been in parish ministry for three decades. He's seen vital and exciting ministries develop in the various settings to which he has been called. This past summer he took a sabbatical.

For the first part of his sabbatical, he went to Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky, where Thomas Merton lived. My friend deepened his own inward journey in a time of prayer and reflection as well as in studying Merton's writings and their significance for Christian life and ministry.

The second part of his sabbatical was spent in South Africa, where he ministered in one of the poorest townships as he sought also to understand more clearly the centrality of social witness for shaping faithful Christian life.

His sabbatical report includes beautiful and insightful reflections that are filled with pastoral wisdom gleaned from years of faithful ministry. They also stretch the mind and soul, as the author attempts to see God's hand at work in the world and in his own life and ministry. They display his conviction that he is called to become more than he is now, even as he searches for what that might mean.

Part of the call to Christian discipleship is to go both deep and wide to discover the pain and hope of our lives and of the world, well beyond the limits of our own temperaments, inclinations and passions, and to become more than we are now. This is especially true for those of us called to the office of ordained ministry. In so doing, we will learn to depend on unlikely friendships—friendships that challenge and sustain us as we venture into the depths of our own lives as well as the breadth of the world that is God's good creation.