

I went to Emmanuel in November 2009 for 2 weeks as a volunteer. This was my second trip as a volunteer to South Africa. 18 months previously, Via People & Places I had spent 3 weeks in a rural part of South Africa (this is the only reason I think going for as little as 2 weeks is acceptable - I would not recommend to 1st time volunteers). My background and professional skill is in HR, and we had originally planned a project based on delivering team building & training workshops.

A couple of weeks before I arrived, there was a disaster in Emmanuel – the then project leader, walked out in very suspicious circumstances. This left everything a bit up in the air for the organisation and made my project plan almost impossible. I was contacted by Calabash and People and Places who very openly told me the story, and asked if I would be happy, at such a late date, to change my project plan & brief. On the day I was leaving, the brief was unclear and changeable!

So I arrived, was collected by the friendly Xolane of Calabash tours and taken to where I was staying. I had opted to stay in a homestay within the township in the home of a lady called Mikie Melato. Mikie's home is very comfortable and secure. She worked hard to ensure that I was made to feel at home and gave me the run of the house – including food & drink, TV, etc. I had a private bedroom and private bathroom with a western flush toilet, bath and constant hot water. She has a couple of family & friends who call in regularly, they are all friendly. Mikie and I adopted a normal routine very quickly – in the afternoon after work, we both napped, worked, read, watched TV. She cooked – sometimes allowing me to help. We ate, cleaned and washed up and watched TV before bed. It was relaxed and comfortable – she was always happy to be open and tell me about her life, job, culture, history etc. One evening she took me to the cinema as well – which was fun – we had to travel in the township taxis, we went shopping, met some of Mikie's friends, and so on.

Me and Mikie (guess who's who?)



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My first day was in two parts – first, a “Township Tour”. This tour was given by a resident of the township and we visited the different “class” areas, heard some of the history of the area and visited some of the fundraising and community projects within the townships (a crèche, an artists’ store). We did also a quick tour of down-town Port Elizabeth. This whole tour is really interesting and probably critical part of the induction. While in the townships, we also visited, briefly, the 3 different Emmanuel locations.

I would suggest – from experience as well – that this is not a sufficient education to understand the full background and you must do some research yourself. I think it’s really important for volunteers to get a deep education about Apartheid and the way it worked, impact it had and so on. I believe that there are a couple of good museums in Port Elizabeth (although I didn’t have time to visit). For other volunteers, if you are travelling at all in SA before volunteering, I can recommend the District 16 museum & Robben Island tour in Cape Town, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg & the Hector Pieterse museum in Soweto (J’burg). Reading about it before you come will also be hugely valuable – I would recommend “The Long Walk to Freedom” – Nelson Mandela; “Invictus” or “Playing the Enemy” (soon to be a film) – John Carlin. If you prefer fiction, read “The Power of One” (also a film, but the book’s way better) & “Tandia” or “Whitethorn”, all by Bryce Courtney. I would also suggest, while you are there, that you just ask people to tell you about it – their pass books, the jobs they could and couldn’t get, the method used to determine their skin colour, and so on. I have yet to find anyone in my two trips there who would take any offence at being asked to talk about these things.

After my tour, I met with Paul for the first time and for an induction with him. This induction was 1-2-1 as I was the only person having my first day that day. I was very well fed & looked after by the Calabash staff, and Paul himself was very friendly and exceptionally open with me. He made no attempt to hide the problems being faced by Emmanuel as an organisation and didn’t hesitate to ensure that he knew what he was asking me to do was both vague & ill-defined as well as being ambitious given I was staying a short while. I really appreciated the opportunity to ask any question I had.

Also – in advance of arriving and as part of this induction, I got a good bit of information about Emmanuel as an organisation, I think it’s important for volunteers to understand the governance of Emmanuel, the nature of the relationship with Calabash, and so on. Having dealt exclusively with Paul until this point, it wouldn’t be difficult for people to think that he was running the whole project – but he’s not, Emmanuel are! Also, you will hear when you are there about Social Development paying, or not paying (as is often the case), the carers, and I think that you could also assume that Social Development are the boss – but they are not. Emmanuel is an independent organisation with its own leadership governance that volunteers need to respect and be accountable to.

Day 2 was when work started properly and I met for the first time the other volunteers there at the same time – 5 women and one man all travelling with Saga Holidays. 4 of them were nurses based in the other two Emmanuel locations and two of them were builders/agricultural & training people who would be based with me at the office location. They had been in PE for a week already and were able to brief me a little more and tell me about their experiences to date.

Emmanuel does the following work:

- They run a kitchen which serves a meal (generous word) to approximately 300 Orphans and Vulnerable Children every day
- They run a small crèche for local children – approximately 25 children at any time. In the crèche they try to teach very basic arithmetic, reading and writing, but they have a space which is no more than 15 sq metres in which to do it – so their ability and resources are limited.



- They manage a group of carers (about 24 in total) based in 3 different locations. The carers work in pairs, for 5 mornings a week, visiting local families who are struggling as a result of HIV, TB, poverty, Child-headed households and so on. On the home visits they try to do anything they can to help – cleaning, bereavement counselling, support with grant applications, and so on. The carers have very limited nursing and healthcare training and can give limited health-care assistance also. The carers also run some support groups for the community and occasional communication campaigns.
- A small number of other little projects to either educate or to fund-raise – such as a gospel choir group.

This is all managed/run by a staff of 3 in a central “office” (which is actually made from a cargo transport container) and is governed by a board of directors which are elected annually from the community. In total they are 34 people given tiny stipends from the social development funding and volunteers.

The background is important to understand what I tried to do. The key lynch-pin or boss in the organisation is the project manager. A lady named Estolene, who had previously worked for the now absent manager P, had been asked to act in this role – she didn’t (doesn’t) have the same kind of experience, knowledge and capability and really was in a very difficult situation. This left the organisation in crisis, and there were two particular things that I got involved with and helped with in this light.

First of all, the week that I arrived they needed urgently to make an application for the following years funding to the Department of Social Development. P had already made an application, but in light of the

situation, that was taken back to be reviewed. I worked with Estolene and the treasurer of the board (Annalise) to get this ready. This involved a number of frustrating & time consuming trips to the Social Development offices and a number of hours spent pouring over numbers and documents. And, that consumed more or less the whole of the first week. Not because it was a weeks worth of work, but because that's the way things can go in South Africa.

I had forgotten, somehow, this one trait of South Africa – things move slowly. Things have to be debated and discussed, everyone has to be consulted and appeased. A lot of time is spent sitting and talking and calming people down. It can be deeply frustrating at times – you are desperate to help and do a good job, desperate not to do it all and then hand it over, but instead to teach and to work through things with people, but it is impossible to get prolonged periods of concentration and undistracted work done. The trips to social development took whole days because the transport options are so limited, and once there, we couldn't find people (seriously, no one in any office or at any desk!), we got pulled into other things and workshops (one about abstinence which made my blood boil) and whatever else was going on, you finally gave documents to someone who gave them a cursory glance and then rang after you'd left to tell you that there was a mistake or something missing. The deadlines kept moving, the stress levels raising, but never the less, no one moved any faster or seemed to make any more effort.

It's hard to understand why it is that way – people every where are sick, desperate, hungry. Social Development has so much, such empowering work to do, yet it is a heavily bureaucratic and inefficient operation. Emmanuel, the same. It feels in the office like there can't be something more important or more urgent, but yet any small distraction is enough and takes everyone's attention for hours. And you have a choice – you can try to work with and around it, or you can try to cut through it. But in both cases the culture can trip you up and you can make mistakes and upset people – I did it, I saw the other volunteers do it and it can be hurtful – you are there to help, you've given your time and a lot of money with great intention, but it can cause problems. For example, I wanted to take Estolene away from the office for the day because I wanted us to have some focused, undistracted attention and working time. I arranged with Paul that we could use his offices in PE for a day and I arranged transport and everything. The suggestion alone made Estolene stress out and caused suspicion among everyone else (I have no idea how everyone else found out ...). We had to talk it through, I had to meet with other members of staff and Estolene faced questions like "if it's good enough for us, why is it not good enough for you?" and in the end, we cancelled our day trip and stayed in the township.

(My tour guide on the Robben Island tour said that there are 3 expressions in South Africa "Now Now" ("*I'm coming Now Now*"); "Just Now" ("*I'll be there just now*") and Now ... and well, none of them actually mean "now" – not in the British sense, anyway!)

My second week I worked almost exclusively with Estolene. We looked at the organisation structure – talked about what work was done and what was the best way to ensure it got done and Estolene could manage/control it. We designed job profiles, activity plans, business plans. I guess it was a kind of 1-2-1 management coaching on a South African level. The work we did, I think, was great, but it was all on paper. Estolene is alone now and needs to make it all a reality – with more time, or more support and commitment from the board, I would have loved to have seen a plan to implement some of these changes. But, even still, if all I managed in the week was to boost Estolene's confidence and give her a sense of the possibilities of what she could really achieve, then I'm happy with that! I would have given anything for another week (or month) by the time I was leaving but it was never an option.



Me and Estolene with one of the crèche kids.

I also did some other small bits and pieces around the place – I spent time with Annalise helping her learn Excel and build some very basic financial tools to try and protect the organisation from future fraud by making it a bit more auditable and up-skilling the team to be able to control a bit better. Patricia & Steve, the two other volunteers on my site, were doing work on the infrastructure of the site – finishing off a toilet block, paving some of the ground area, building a shelter for the kids to be able to be outside in the sun, working in the garden, and so on – and when my team were distracted or in a protracted meeting, I was able to lend them a hand with a paint-brush. I also got stuck into some of the documentation and history of the organisation to see if I could make suggestions for improvements – and some came out.

Two weeks work in my normal world would have seen me get a lot more done and have more output for the time, but I'm happy that my contribution was valuable – especially considering it was such a short time I had.

Emmanuel is not a perfectly run organisation – they have limited resources, work in horrible conditions at times, and are under-skilled for what they really want to achieve. There is poor workmanship, nepotism, dodgy paperwork and some issues with trust. They are under-paid & under funded and, even then, the money is not spent wisely. In the kitchen and the crèche they are busy and can make nothing go a long way – but in all other areas – the office, the care centres etc – there is a remarkable amount of sitting around and talking that goes on which anyone coming from a western, working background will find frustrating and confusing. It's difficult not to think that people just don't care or that they are lazy – but you need to always try to remember, hard as it might be, the conditions that these people live in, the fact that they do this for next to no money, the fact that this organisation has been here, doing this, a long time before Social Development and Callabash came along, and that it was started by people in this community, for people in this community, because they could see the way that HIV & Aids was destroying that community. I deeply

hope that they find a way to continue to grow and contribute because the value of what they do and what they want to do cannot be measured!

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