

FHAM Conference 2011: The Grace School

I have been asked to speak to you today about one of Hope For Africa Mission's ministries, namely The Grace Christian Private School, generally known as The Grace. I am very aware that sitting here today is someone who knows far more about this subject than I do, so please feel free to correct any mistakes I make, Hendrick! In any case I know very little about how the school began, or the role played in that by World Share or by Mr Mike Thomas, and not much more about its history since, so I shall focus more on what I do know, which is its relationship with my own school, St. Andrew's, Pangbourne, and on the current situation and needs of The Grace. In the short time I have I could not possibly cover even those subjects adequately, so I would welcome questions at the end and then again afterwards perhaps over lunch.

The Grace School is situated in the town of Siyabuswa where Hope For Africa is based. I suppose you could see it as a witness to that town, and the early training ground of future church leaders and missionaries. Siyabuswa is, in its first appearance to a western European, rather a poor, dirty, uninspiring place. **Slides 2-6 Siyabuswa** There is litter everywhere; animals wander the streets eating some of it. There are few if any street lights, not much traffic, and very few jobs—the official unemployment rate must be about 60%, with no social security payments, so there is quite a lot of crime compared to here, and everyone lives behind burglar bars. Life expectancy is not high, mainly owing to the AIDs epidemic which ravaged much of the country in the nineties and noughties and is still affecting so many families today, with many children left orphaned. (This is one thing the school is addressing today through its excellent Gold Peer education programme, which FHAM helped to make possible by the purchase of laptops for the young mentors.) There are few shops and services compared to any British town **slides 8-9 of shopping centre and market**; lots of things we take for granted are just not available locally, including reliable daily provision of electricity and internet connectivity. The local government schools generally have a poor reputation—in fact, most of their teachers send their own children to The Grace! Given the circumstances and the unemployment, expectations have not been high. Enter a man with a vision from God—Dr. Hendrick Mahlangu, who wants to see Siyabuswa become a model Christian city—and one part of that is to create a model Christian school.

The Grace was started in 2003 and has grown every year since; it now numbers about 500 pupils, and at the end of this year its first cohort of matriculating pupils, whom they call learners, will be leaving, with some applying for university. **Slides 10-12 of early Grace, and Penny Mile** From the start, to become known as a place of good value, the fees were set very low and the staff worked for sacrificial salaries. State schools charge low fees because most of their costs are met by the government, but The Grace gets only a small subsidy which comes erratically and usually late. So it has depended from

the beginning on the generosity of others. One of those others is St. Andrew's School, which began its support in 2004 after a surprise visit from Hendrick. God's hand was clearly at work in this. The full story is told in a magazine article available on our table at the back there today, but to cut a long story short, Hendrick was staying with Chris Evans as he is this weekend, when Chris was due to come and speak at a St. Andrew's Chapel service, so Hendrick came along too and after impressing us at tea, was invited to say a few words in the service. At the time, we had (temporarily, as it turned out) lost contact with our Ugandan partner school and were wondering whether we should be seeking a different one. That service in February 2004 was one of those life-changing moments. We—that is, the Head Jeremy Snow, and I—entered chapel uncertain, and we left it sure that we now had a new African partner school. So we started donating some of the money we raised for school charities to The Grace. And it might have stopped there, but The Lord had other ideas which began to come into the light on Hendrick's next visit in 2006. Jeremy had already shared a thought with me about taking a trip to The Grace, so that was on my mind to ask Hendrick, but the same thought had occurred to him and as soon as the subject was broached, our minds met. **Slides 13-15 Grace today, RJH and CMR** We decided on a visit in the summer holiday of 2007, and once I got back to the staff room in morning break the school secretary caught me. She had heard already about the plan and offered her services as assistant. Carolyn Reeves is still assisting here today, and I could not have organised the three trips we have now completed without her. She lived in several African countries in her youth and has been the ideal partner. In fact, when we were there this year and Hendrick was planning a trip into Ghana and Burkina Faso, Carolyn knew exactly where he was going, even to a fairly remote inland village in Burkina Faso!

The trips have become biennial and the teams of six raise money for the school before they go out. At first this was an afterthought, now it is an essential part of the team's work. Because the children are aged only 11-13, we have had some media attention (we've even had Hendrick heard across Berkshire on the BBC this year) and the name of Grace is becoming quite well known in the English prep school world now. (There are other articles from independent school magazines on the table.) **Slide 16 of Zothile with NWN reporter** This is the current Head Girl of the Grace, Zothile Skosana, being interviewed by a South African reporter from the Newbury Weekly News. She would have a story to tell now if she were here. Her visa to come arrived on the morning of her flight, just after she'd been devastated by the news that it was all off. When we were in Siyabuswa, she was just about to lose her place at the school owing to unpaid fees. We were able to pay them and save her place. She is incredibly grateful. But things like that are happening all the time in Siyabuswa, and we get just a little taste of it when we go. What I'd like to do is to give you a flavour of these wonderful trips by putting a few slides to the music of a song from Chris Webbe which my sister-in-law introduced me to. **Slides 17-45**

Slide show rolling 46-47 What I hope comes across there is the warmth of the relationship which quickly develops between Grace learners and St. Andrew's pupils. All our team members have returned saying they want to go back, and one cycled the Pyrennees this year to raise money for the current project. Our hosts make us feel so welcome and special and the Grace children give ours gifts, letters, poems and cards. We have visited the boarding houses, one of which our gifts helped to build, and children in their homes, which always affects us emotionally **slides 48-50**. Our affluent children are always amazed by the Grace learners' generosity and contentment: as one said after our first visit, 'I never realised people with so little could be so happy.' You can read many such comments in the journals I have brought along today, written by our pupils while there and waiting for you on our table over there. One writes of it being 'overwhelmingly exhilarating' being mobbed by the juniors in break, and incredibly moving to interview the sponsored children. **Slide of Blessing** 'At the end of each interview every child said "I hope God reserves a place in heaven for my sponsor." It is such a privilege to see that money which we have raised and things we have taken out with us are being put to use. This year we saw and heard a recorder group's first public performance **slide of it**: they had learnt to play on instruments one of our pupils had bought after a marathon sponsored swim, and with books she had also sent out. We had an international tug-of-war match **slide of it** with the rope we'd sent out three years before, and I still remember the head, Mrs Ntuli, taking notes on how to do it while watching a contest at our school when we brought her over in 2008 with the Chair of Governors, Mrs Nkoana, for a fact-finding mission in English schools **slide of it**. We are today wearing tracksuits she gave us this year **slide of it**, which is a reminder that the relationship is two-way, not just one of donor and recipient at all. In fact, we always feel we have gained more as a school from our link with The Grace than we have given. It has increased our global awareness, our compassion and our charitable activity and fund-raising, and it has afforded wonderful educational experiences for those children selected to go out. We now have nine Grace children sponsored by our school and its families **slide of Manhahhanhas**, a number due to rise again next year, so the benefit is spreading not just to more Grace learners but also to more St. Andrew's families.

When we went out in 2009 the youngest children at the school were housed in a quite unsuitable building, a large metal shed, and our pupils were concerned about this and wanted to put a new Early Years centre on the agenda. **Slides of old nursery** First there was the boys' hostel to build, which was managed by early in 2010, partly thanks to a grant from a Greyfriars Church building fund. Then we set our sights on raising the money to build that centre. One St. Andrew's grandmother climbed Kilimanjaro for it, **slide-Mrs King** and we've done all sorts of things since to raise money. But it takes a long time. In fact the need was so desperate by the beginning of this year, owing to rising numbers at the school, that the Board decided to rent a disused kindergarten block not far from the main site, though some of the funds we'd raised had to be spent on

renovating it first. Here it is now. **Slides of new EY block.** This is a much better place for the little ones. However, running a school on a spilt site is never easy and Mrs Ntuli would like a new Early Years centre built at The Grace, as originally intended, so we are still raising money for that. But as The Grace is only one of a number of ventures which St. Andrew's supports charitably, and as the projected cost is around £24000, **slide of figures** The Grace needs help from more than the one source if it is to build this centre soon, which is why it is one of the projects featured in this year's FHAM Christmas appeal. We are praying that, just as The Lord has answered so many prayers for this school before, He will do so again and provide the necessary funds so that by the time we make, God willing, our next visit in 2013, we shall see the centre built.

I hope you can see that almost anyone visiting the Grace is captured by its special quality. One inspector was last year, calling it the best black-run school he had ever seen. It is indeed a work of God's grace, and there is so much more I'd like to tell you about—the prayerfulness and cheerfulness of the staff **slide—Mr Skosana**, the nature of the teaching, the wonderful worship **slide-worship** the life of the boarders, **slides-boarders** the vision of the Board for the development of the school, and the way the Lord has led us in our partnership journey so far—but I am going to finish with a glimpse of the DVD made about this year's trip, which is also on our table and on sale afterwards, proceeds to The Grace Early Years Fund. It is a good hour's viewing, but all we have time for now is a few minutes' worth. Enjoy.