

THE PRESENTATION FOR THE HIGHVELD DIOCESAN COUNCIL MEETING: ST AGNES ANGLICAN CHURCH – BALFOUR NORTH

DATE: 09 March 2019, St Chad's Anglican Parish, Edenvale

Balfour North is a small gold mining and maize farming town in Dipaleseng Municipality, Gert Sibande District of Mpumalanga Province. It is 80 km East of Johannesburg and 59 km from Benoni. It was founded in 1898 around the farms of Vlakfontein by Mr Frederick McHattie, and was originally named after him as McHattiesburg. Then the name was changed in 1905 to Balfour after the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Arthur James Balfour, who visited South Africa the same year. Balfour offered a lucrative business combination of both mining and farming in a flourishing post Anglo-Boer War South Africa. It further developed as a channel networking to the East of Johannesburg leading both to Natal and Free State. Earlier in the 1800s a thinly dispersed indigenous communities established themselves around the reddish hills after the ethnic warfare. Beyond wars a community developed to make a living from mining and farming.

The Church Structure

By the time the Church through missionary work of the Diocese of Pretoria, and later Johannesburg, a strong community had built its housing from mud bricks and red stone, later red bricks used, with a tin roofing. More and more people were brought to work in the mines from around the country. It seems likely that St Agnes was established when African men with missionary influence came from Eastern Cape to work in the mines. Red stones for foundation and red bricks were used for a small structure that continues to exist up today. The people in Balfour believe the church was built around 1929. It is semi-oval at the sanctuary area and about 80 square meters. In the 1950s and 60s the building served as a pre-school during the week, which was run by the able Maria Mbhele and sponsored by the World Vision. The same building would become a church gathering over weekend.

A dedicated Catechist, Mr Edward Taylor worked in this church for many years. He came from originally from Lesotho; a son of an Irish father that married Mosotho woman. After years of hard work, he gave up due to physical ailments. He died and was buried at the cemetery of the Anglican Mission Station in Fortuna, outside Balfour. (It would be interesting to follow up on how property here was sold to present owners who have built a Lodge in Fortuna. Edward Taylor's influence was widespread and his legacy is still celebrated. But the church, with his retirement, began to decline and many people felt neglected. Things deteriorated: the land was divided into two and the church house occupied by other people. Priests from Nigel and Heidelberg worked closely with Taylor.

Church Members

This church served both mine workers and the outlying farms. It seemed to have been viable under Taylor, with over 200 members (individuals and families). The experience of declination of Balfour upon Taylor's retirement, brought this church entirely under pastoral care of Ratanda. Ratanda, St Augustine, was itself surviving by farmworkers, couldn't provide the necessary support to keep Balfour viable. Older people retired and died and younger ones migrated with economic hardship that worsened with the closure of coal mines and Escom power station. Under Ratanda the people of Balfour felt their monies benefitted Ratanda. They didn't even have a bank book. It was Fr

Barnabas who helped them keep money and develop their church. The build was partly renovated: tiles were laid out and ceiling put up; they were able to erect a palisade fence.

Declination

The morale has gone down; many are demotivated. The number has gone down to less than 50 individuals and about 20 families that are keeping the church going. The priest is self-supporting and retired, and is traveling from Nigel. The town has declined in growth and development. The church building has been rotting.

Any Potential and Hope about Balfour?

Yes. There are predictions about future gold mining. In fact about 10 years ago the gold mine was opened only to be closed. Eskom has since re-opened, future viability and business interests reawakening. The Township of Balfour, Siyathemba is fast growing and the population is tenfold the size of Taylor's era. Potentially, Balfour offers an exciting mission work for our church. Investing in developing the church in that area will bring back hope in Balfour; stabilize lives of communities that have lost hope.

Conclusion

We wish to take this opportunity to thank the Bishop in assisting with Lenten Appeal. We are grateful of many parishes that has been keen to assist and have been asking for more information. But we are aware that the greatest work has to be done by people of Balfour: by walking streets of Balfour, knock at the doors of Anglican homes and invite them back to the church. These are the words of Wardens and Lay ministers that I met with. They believe there are many Anglicans that need to be brought back and rebuild a viable community that will make Edward Taylor proud in his grave. Even more importantly, just to advance Kingdom of God in Balfour.