

## **What is your BHAG?**

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
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In the Episcopal Church, clergy are encouraged to take time for serious reflection and restoration, to listen for the still small voice that is God's spirit calling us to ministry. So it is that 25 years ago—like our rector today-- I went on sabbatical during which I attended a conference with 30 or so other priests to develop my BHAG. What's a BHAG? It's an acronym for **Big Hairy Audacious Goal** which comes from Harvard University's School of Business. We were encouraged to embrace a goal that looked far over the horizon, that would take a lifetime to achieve. To meet the standard, the BHAG had to require resources beyond my capabilities and for which I had no foreseeable prospects to obtain. Once our Big Hair Audacious Goal is set, we are to work toward it and allow God to move in our life and the lives of those whose gifts and talents will ultimately be needed to achieve the BHAG. We worked with a support team of fellow clergy to develop and test the BHAG.

Quite a daunting task. So, I ask you, what's your BHAG?

Here's what I started with 25 years ago. **Number one:** establish and fund a pension program for the indigenous clergy of Ghana so that they could retire with something other than abject poverty. **Number Two:** Bring safe sustainable drinking water to 250,000 souls in West Africa. Having set these BHAGs, my life was forever changed. Within a few years I left 20 years of parish ministry to pursue a business opportunity that came with a donation of over \$1MM over five years to jump start my BHAG. I said "Yes" I became an unpaid Missionary to Africa in my home Diocese of Los Angeles. Regardless of my station in life, I took on the mantra that "I work for Africa," following in the footsteps of giants such as Albert Schweitzer and David Livingstone. Livingstone was an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Englishman who believed that the African slave trade could be destroyed through the influence of Christianity and by treating the African people with kindness and respect. (See note.)

I never believed that I had a superior spirituality to my African sisters and brothers, but I did challenge them when I saw traditions and cultural aspects which were harsh and unjust, especially as it related to girls and women. And I have been challenged, transformed, as Christ speaks to me through different languages, faces, and cultures. I have come to love Africa all because of my BHAG. But I am not naïve to its many challenges.

So what has become of my BHAGs 25 years later? It's mixed. Four years ago the pension plan was established and fully funded, much to the amazement of many. It took so much work with the bishops and clergy. So much distrust to overcome, so much money to earn and then direct into a system which was secure and enduring. But it gives me joy to say that this BHAG has been fulfilled in my lifetime.

The second BHAG of bringing safe drinking water to 250,000 souls is still underway. I set up a family foundation in 2000 and we have brought water to over 25,000 souls. Just last month, we drilled three water wells for remote villages. When you bring safe, sustainable water to a village EVERYTHING changes. Women and children no longer spend 4-6 hours a day hauling water for drinking and cooking. This frees the children to be able to go to school and the women to pursue micro businesses. When you bring water to a village, you both save lives and transform a community.

After our first 6 or 8 water projects, the Ghanaian government embarked on a massive potable water campaign for the country. Our foundation piggybacks on this effort, enhancing the infrastructure by

tying into main water lines and connecting them with remote villages. Honestly, the goal of safe water for 250,000 remains some distance away, but that's perfectly fine.

As I neared completion of the Pension fund, I embrace another goal: freeing 1,000 children from slavery, that ancient evil, rampant in Africa, and now found in every country on the globe. I became, **I am, an abolitionist**, a stockholder in today's underground railroad. My family and friends have funded the rescue for more than 250 children over the last five years. We have a fabulous network for rescuing, rehabilitating and returning children home. I know this—if every Church member in America refused to purchase products made by slave labor, we could end the vast majority of slavery. Sadly, the American Church largely refuses to mobilize Christians to act on Jesus' first sermon, when he preached that today the time for freeing the captives has been fulfilled.

I have brought with me a cloth with the handprints of children freed from slavery earlier this year. It will hold the Bread of Life we receive at Holy Communion. You will be forever connected to the hands of these formerly enslaved children

I invite you to consider what God would have you do to bring freedom to the captives. It's a simple enough question. I also invite you to join me in Africa next year to experience a transformational journey, to experience the Underground Railroad at work and share in the rich heritage of the African continent.

If I had to give up all my books save one and life on a desert island, I would choose the Prayer Book/Hymnal combo book (and of course, smuggle in my Bible.) The Hymnal is poetry set to music, telling the stories of Christian from every century. Picking a favorite is impossible, but one hymn which stands out as uniquely American is "Lift Every Voice and Sing", also known as the Negro National Anthem. Written to honor President Abraham Lincoln, this hymn was sung every day by children in black segregated schools. It tells the story of slavery, freedom, and steadfast faith. I hope that you will allow its poetry to sink into your bones and soar your spirit.

So, what is God's BHAG for your life? Whether you are 20 or 80, you have a vocation to make a difference, to impact the world for good, to bring the Gospel alive. To quote another favorite hymn, "Come, labor on. Who dares idle on the harvest plain while all around you waves the golden grain?"

It is a blessing to be with you. Now let us rise and sing the final verse of the heroic hymn "Life Every Voice and Sing."

*Canon Doug note: Sorry, folks. I "mangled" Dr. Livingstone in unscripted comments. Livingstone, a great 19<sup>th</sup> century British explorer, missionary and abolitionist ( NOT 18<sup>th</sup> c) advocated primarily against the Arab-East Coast African slave trade which he personally encountered. He spoke that "Ujiji slavers, like the Kilwa and Portuguese, are the vilest of the vile. It is not a trade, but a system of consecutive murders. They go to plunder and kidnap, and every trading trip is nothing but a foray." He did indeed write against the "slaveocracy" of the Confederacy and cited the South's role as world's leading cotton source as "a great part of the reason of the frantic sympathy of thousands with the rebels in the great Black war in America." (Livingstone's Last Journals.) He considered his efforts against slavery as much more significant than his fame as an explorer. Finally, Livingstone was Scottish, not English!*