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## Project People creates bridge for S. Africa's less fortunate

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Palm Beach columnist

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Voices soared, the piano jumped and 500 people swayed and clapped their hands.

It was a great afternoon in church.

There were whites and blacks, old people and young, Jews and Christians across denominations and one brave teenager from South Africa.

It was a concert, a prayer meeting, a fundraiser and a call for citizen action.

The event was called "Celebrating Life," and it brought together lots of people who wouldn't normally celebrate together.

"You had the lady from Palm Beach talking to the lady next to her, from Riviera Beach," said the Rev. Linda Tarry-Chard, who created both the event and the foundation it benefited, "sitting in front of the lady from Singer Island, in back of the guy from Boynton Beach."

The Florida Atlantic University Gospel Choir sang along with Ann Turnoff, a cantor from Boca Raton, and Diana Solomon-Glover, lead soloist at The Riverside Church in New York City.

They shook the Cason United Methodist Church in Delray Beach, a mostly white church with a black female pastor, the Rev. Sharon Austin, as if to straddle Swinton Avenue, the historic color line when Delray was a segregated city.

Back in January, Cason United Methodist was scarred by a vandal who rearranged the letters of the church marquee into a repulsive racist epithet.

But Sunday, the church showed off our better angels.

"We take people of goodwill, people who want to make this world a better place, people who are hopeful in spirit," Tarry-Chard said, "and we create a bridge so they can connect with people who have the same feeling but are at an economic disadvantage in South Africa."

Tarry-Chard spends most of her time in New York as a minister at The Riverside Church. She also is a part-time resident of Delray Beach. Which gives you some idea of her energy. (Full disclosure: She and her husband, Jim Chard, are friends of

mine.)

In 1995, she founded the Project People Foundation to aid the Republic of South Africa, newly freed of apartheid but still beset by poverty and poor education. And increasingly, by AIDS.

Her idea was to find ways to help women and children of South Africa. Her talent is to come up with human-scale projects that make the participants feel as if they're actually accomplishing something. An early effort, for example, involved sending 15,000 black dolls to South African children who had never seen dolls in their likeness.

Currently, her foundation is helping thousands of South African children get into primary school while training women to be entrepreneurs -- all in the same elegant project.

They're teaching and employing women in Johannesburg to make school uniforms to donate to local township children. Some 500,000 South African children miss school because their families can't afford the uniforms -- a hand-me-down requirement from colonial days. The women trained in sewing also do jobs for pay. That's a big deal in a country where 57 percent of black women are unemployed.

Another nifty project uses computer videoconferencing technology to link American adults with African children.

One such American, a New Yorker named Andrea DuBois, has built a relationship with 16-year-old Manini Joyce Mkhabela, orphaned when her mother died five years ago of AIDS. With DuBois' support, Mkhabela is going to school and has a chance at a future.

On Sunday, on her first trip to America, she was up on the pulpit of Cason United Methodist and reading a poem she'd written.

The poem acknowledges the "cruel, selfish devil" of death. And yet concludes:

*Let's all celebrate life.*

She finished to an ovation. I clapped and rose to my feet along with everyone else.

We were clapping for her. And we were clapping for the idea that any one of us can make a difference.

We just have to do it.

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