

Ring Ceremony, February 5, 2019 at St George's Cathedral

The Story of the Black Ring  
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When I worked for a Sabbatical in the Diocese of Amazonia, I wasn't there for long before I discovered that almost all the leaders of the church around me both lay and ordained, wore a very simple black wooden ring.

When finally I asked about it, I was told that the ring was made from the wood of the Tucoman tree which is very black. It is fashioned by very poor folks in the deep Amazon and given to people who they experience as being ready to help the poor. In many ways, wearing this ring marked you and made you one who got approached far more often by the poor who begged in the streets. For the people of the Anglican Church in the Amazon, many of whom were just barely above the poverty line, it was worn as a badge of honour, and a reminder to them that when approached by those in need, their faith called upon them to NOT be the sort of person who can walk by on the opposite side of the road. They were always stopping, listening, and in any way they possibly could, responding to the needs of those who turned to them for help.

The black ring could not be bought. It had to be given to you, and it wasn't simply a thank you for good deeds of the past, but rather carried with it the responsibility to live into the calling that "what you have done for the least of these, you have done for Jesus."

The story of my own black ring  
During that time in the Amazon, I was taken to a community called Terra Firme which simply means Firm Ground. The name for this community was deeply ironic, as these people were anything but on Firm Ground. The people couldn't

afford land to build a house, so they would build on stilts in the marshy areas along the river. Little by little they would bring home dirt and throw it beneath their homes until they had some firm ground under the tiny shacks.

The place was overridden with crime, and in fact, a few months after I visited there, the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Primate of Brazil were robbed at gunpoint as they tried to get there.

The poverty was so intense that one of the biggest problems these people encountered was that of human trafficking.

Getting out was hopeless, and so teens would be told, "Come with us to our football camp and you can become a great football player." Those who took the bait often found themselves basically enslaved in the gold mines in Surinam, or forced into prostitution.

Now the small Anglican Church in that community had fallen in on itself, and all other denominations had abandoned the area because of the danger. People kept themselves locked in behind steel gates and locked doors.

Money was so sorely needed that children of that area ended their education the moment they were old enough to sell chiclets on a street corner in the city. Almost no one there could read and write. With a rotted out shell of a building, the church there rented a space, and as opposed to offering worship services to meet the Church's needs, instead began to teach the children to read and write on weekends and evenings. They addressed the most pressing needs to bring hope to the community.

One memory that will stick with me always is that the Bishop's tiny wife, who always took the incredible risk of getting in to Terra Firme and working with the teachers who volunteered from the other parishes took me there on this day. As she walked up the street of this horribly impoverished place, these terrified people opened the gates and came into the streets. They ran up and surrounded us with joy in their faces. I vividly remember one small child running up to Ruth, the Bishop's wife, throwing her arms

around her, looking up into her face, and asking, "are we going to have church today?"

I had been given a couple of hundred dollars from my congregation to support ministry in the Diocese of the Amazon. Driving out of Terra Firme that day, I was overwhelmed by what I had seen and experienced that day. I gave the money from my congregation and some extra of my own to see to it that this ministry carried on, that there were resources to keep bringing hope to Terra Firme.

A couple of days later someone showed up at the Cathedral gates. They were well known to Ruth and so she went out to greet them. She came back moments later and said that the guest wanted to see me. When we met there, he presented me with my black ring, and as much as it has been a challenge at times, when I look down and sense it's reminder that I cannot neglect the marginalized.

I cannot walk by those in need. I have promised to "Strive for Justice and Peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. To proclaim by word and example, the good news of God in Christ. To seek and serve Christ in ALL persons, loving my neighbour as myself."

And remembering that much of the suffering in Terra Firme and so many places like it was caused by wealthy nations coming in and tearing up their resources for our gain, I have also promised "to strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation and respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth."

February 6, 2019