

# In Search of Diamonds

## Report on a Visit to South Africa

*Richard Higginson* recounts his experiences in visiting a South African diamond mine and the social projects around it. He witnessed the tension between the difficult past and aspiring present, and the ethical issues being faced.

From July 27 to August 3 2015 I was in South Africa, taking part in the business–church initiative *Mining in Partnership: an Empowerment Agenda*. This resulted from two consultations at the Vatican and Lambeth Palace that brought chief executives of mining companies together with faith leaders. Mining in Partnership aims to help theological colleges and similar institutions to equip pastors and church leaders to serve communities affected by mining. This initiative is being spearheaded by Dr Esther Reed, author of the preceding article. She is putting together *Resources for Teaching and Reflection*, designed for use by churches situated among mining communities world-wide.

To increase understanding, groups of church leaders are being invited to visit major mining sites. I was one of a group of 10 from a variety of countries who visited the Anglo–American Venetia diamond mine, operated by De Beers, in northern South Africa near the border with Zimbabwe.

I subsequently wrote a report for Anglo–American which took the form of answers to questions set.

### 1. What were your expectations before the visit?

My expectation was of a well-organised corporate visit. Multi-national companies have the experience and

expertise to make such a visit run smoothly and enjoyably, and neither Anglo–American nor De Beers disappointed. The hospitality was warm, generous and genuine.

Two things did surprise and, to be honest, slightly disappointed me. The first was the relatively short time we spent at the Venetia mine compared with the region surrounding the mine visiting local community projects. I would have welcomed opportunity to talk with employees who are physically involved in the process of mining. The second was that, though corporate executives expressed the desire to engage with leaders in the faith community, and did so with the ten members of the visiting group, they did not appear to be reciprocating this locally. The community representatives at the Musina meeting did not include any who introduced themselves as local church leaders. Perhaps the latter had been invited but shown no interest; if so, that would be very regrettable.

### 2. Why did you agree to participate in the visit?

I speak and write extensively on business ethics and the theology of work. The activities of companies are of great interest to me, especially where they impinge so heavily on social wellbeing. Mining is a primeval industry which positively bristles with ethical issues. When I was



approached about being involved in the Mining in Partnership initiative I therefore jumped at the opportunity. I had the chance to visit mines in Peru, Ghana and South Africa, and would have been happy to visit any of them, but chose South Africa because the issues seemed particularly interesting, given the troubled involvement of mining in the history of South Africa.

### **3. Please provide a short overview of your experience in country and on site – sharing highlights of the people you met and realities that confronted you during the visit.**

I enjoyed meeting all the other members of the faith group along with the corporate executives. I felt that as a group we ‘gelled’ well, our common interests, concerns and humanity readily transcending the variety in our ethnic backgrounds. It was a particular delight to meet black Africans who are starting to move into senior corporate positions, and interesting to meet people from the West involved in making investment decisions about church money. I was impressed by the idealism of the Anglo and De Beers senior executives; they all seemed genuinely concerned about the positive impact of the company, singing from the same hymn-sheet and expressing a corporate integrity that bodes well for the future. The emphasis on health and safety – and the pride taken in the fact that there had been no fatalities at the mine since 2006 – was salutary. But I wasn’t surprised by this because my work as Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall has brought me into contact with many similarly ‘ethical’ businesspeople.

### **4. What are your top (three) personal ‘learnings’ from the visit?**

a) What we saw at Venetia and in Limpopo province was very impressive. But I did have the sense that Venetia was a flagship mine, perhaps the South African mine of which not just Anglo-American but the country as a whole had most cause to be proud. It is easier to wax lyrical about a diamond mine than a coal mine. It’s also a fact that because the mine is situated away from a heavily populated area the pollutive effects of the industry were much less evident there.

b) The reading I did before the visit, the meetings we had with other groups in Johannesburg on the Friday and the visits made to museums in Johannesburg and Pretoria


make clear that the mining industry cannot escape a heavy historical burden for the development of apartheid in South Africa. The processes of racial oppression and subordination were fuelled in particular by the way that gold mining developed and was organised. While the mining companies may largely have put their houses in order, there are things of which to be ashamed in the fairly recent past. But the same is true of the churches and the wretched involvement of many of them in racist ideology and practices.

c) The meetings we had with community groups revealed a clear and persistent pattern. Speaker after speaker made some acknowledgement of positive things that the company were doing but there was a longing that they ‘do more’. This was particularly evident in Musina with regard to the improvement of the health service. However, this reflected a perceived wholesale failure in the competence of local government. Companies cannot and should not be expected to take the place of local government. Nevertheless, involvement in discrete, specific and manageable projects in the local community can make an important contribution to social wellbeing.

### **5. In what way will the experience of the site visit have an impact on your own professional endeavours?**

I am now better informed about the process of mining. I am aware of the huge significance of the industry in the development of Africa. But I realise I’ve only touched the tip of the iceberg and would like to follow up by visiting other types of mines in other places.

### **6. What is your message of hope to the companies involved in this engagement process?**

I want to say: keep up the good work. But do not be surprised by people’s cynicism, whether inside the corporate world or in society as a whole, and recognise there is a constant struggle to maintain ethical standards and retain the vision that a well run company can make to the common good. In the immediate future, there is a definite danger that the fall in commodity prices could lead companies to draw back from constructive engagement with the wider world and retreat to a narrow ‘bottom line’ mentality. 



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