Hope from Sudan

Holston rejoices in progress, while preparing for the most productive year yet

A rainbow adds more beauty to the view from the Crop Training Center, where Holston mission teams often lodge in Yei, Sudan. Photos are courtesy of Mike Sluder, leader of the October 2008 clergy intern team.

By Annette Spence

Two teams went to Yei in fall 2008. Two more will go in spring 2009.

To date, five mission teams have represented Holston Conference in south Sudan, where a covenant partnership has been formed with the the East Africa Conference.

Yet, when the first Holston team visited Yei in March 2006, a partnership did not seem possible. The people of Yei were angry. After 50 years of civil war, they desperately needed help. Several U.S. church groups had come to south Sudan, but they never returned.

"The fact that we continue to go back is one of our biggest accomplishments," said the Rev. Mike Sluder, who has made two trips to Yei.

"Every time we get off the plane and step on the ground in Sudan, that relationship is solidified. Because Holston is coming back."

In 2009, Holston will fulfill several commitments in the covenant between the two United Methodist conferences. The promise that excited the Sudanese people most during his October trip, Sluder said, is the upcoming two-year stay of a Holston clergy couple.

In June, the Rev. Boo Hankins will be appointed as "transitional" district superintendent of Yei. He and the Rev. Phyllis Hankins will serve for two years, training leaders for the United Methodist Church in Sudan and coordinating Holston's mission work. (Church groups desiring to provide covenant support for Hankins may contact the Connectional Ministries office toll-free at 866-690-4080.)

Last year, churches gave a record-breaking Annual Conference offering of $185,000 for Sudan. Several individuals, churches, Sunday school classes, and children's groups have made additional contributions. Those gifts are bearing fruit in south Sudan, mission leaders say.

Three wells and three watersprings have recently been dug, through gifts channeled through the Holston Conference Foundation. One well bears the names of the Rev. Doug and Mary Jane Smith.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) estimates that 4,000 people are served by these wells, according to Danny Howe, Holston Missions Team leader.

"They provide clean water, but they also substantiate our medical work," Howe said.

Three medical teams have treated thousands for malaria, parasites, skin irritations, respiratory problems, and other maladies, Howe said.

During the November 2008 trip alone, 2,809 patients were seen by Holston medical providers working nonstop. Six hundred mosquito nets were distributed.

"I bask in the glory of God's grace for what has been done in his name," said physician and team leader Mike Hartsell, in an e-mail upon his return home. "Let people know that God is at work in Yei."

Sluder headed a team of clergy interns representing nine Holston districts in October. For six days, they used interpreters to teach classes on preaching, Methodist history, Bible study, sacraments, basic doctrine, and John Wesley's "three simple rules." Eighty to 100 clergy and lay leaders, representing 16 local churches near Yei, attended each class.

Holston members who come back from Sudan often speak of the overwhelming need. They cry about sick people who walk miles and wait hours for the care of a medical team. They say they lie awake thinking about the homeless children orphaned by AIDS in Sudan.

For all the work completed in Yei, much more is needed, said Howe. (See lists on page 7.) Expectations are running high for the 2009 Annual Conference offering to be as generous as last year's offering. The goal is $125,000.

"We hope the Conference will come back in June and do the same thing as last year," Howe said.

Sluder said that his team members discovered what it means to be in partnership with East Africans, when they came home feeling they had received more than they gave.

"Our clergy team had such a renewed sense of, 'This is why we do this,'" Sluder said. "The Sudanese people have such an incredible amount of joy and hope in the face of what seems to us an extremely bleak and desperate situation. We have so much around us that we depend on. All they have to depend on is God."

Instead of claiming Hope *for* Sudan, Sluder said, Holston may end up receiving hope *from* Sudan. ■

Libby Dearing of Kingsport teaches choir practice.

"Every time we get off the plane and step on the ground in Sudan, that relationship is solidified. Because Holston is coming back."

Boo and Phyllis Hankins get a lesson in Sudanese travel.

Done:

- ►**Sent** five mission teams
- ►**Raised** $185,000 at last year's Annual Conference
- ►**Paid** pastors' salaries for 3 years (gift of Holston cabinet and clergy)
- ►**Paid** teachers' salaries at Yei school
- ►**Provided** textbooks
- ►**Trained** pastors and lay leaders of 20 churches (the work of 3 teams so far)
- ►**Provided** medical care and medicine for thousands (the work of 3 teams so far)
- ►**Hired** local physician and nurse
- ►**Gave** scholarships for two young adults to attend Africa University
- ►**Gave** scholarships for 11 children to attend Humble School in Uganda
- ►**Built** 1 "block" of a school in Yei (where 1,100 children are now attending)
- ►**Bought** grinding mill and oil processing mill for widows to earn income (gift of United Methodist Women)
- ►**Dug** three wells and three watersprings (gift of individuals and church groups via the Holston Conference Foundation)
- ►**Bought** property for a United Methodist compound
- ►**Leased** property for Hankins home and new communications center

A child in Yei cares for his little sister.

A well is dug in honor of Doug and Mary Jane Smith.

To do:

- ►**Take** $125,000 offering at Holston Annual Conference in June
- ►**Support** district superintendent in Yei for two years beginning June 2009 (Boo and Phyllis Hankins)
- ►**Build** superintendent's home
- ►**Establish** communications center (gift of First Oak Ridge UMC)
- ►**Dig** another well
- ►**Provide** a medical clinic
- ►**Build** 2 to 3 more "blocks" of school
- ►**Develop** United Methodist compound
- ►**Assist** with microenterprise ventures toward Sudanese self-sustainability
- ►**Identify** more Yei citizens for higher education opportunities
- ►**Send** more teams to provide pastor training, medical care, and Vacation Bible school; develop relationships; and assist with church growth and community development

Holston interns teach pastors and lay leaders of Yei. Eighty to 100 attended classes during an October trip.