SUMMIT

Holston leads the way to south Sudan

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A UMNS Report

United Methodists from five annual conferences attended a summit to discuss sending urgent help to the suffering people of Sudan.

Days after the Holston Annual Conference overshot a goal to raise $125,000 for southern Sudan, a gathering was held to connect others United Methodists who want to serve in the same region.

The Sudan Summit also included two bishops, two Sudanese Lost Boys, and two staff members of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). The gathering was held June 20-21 in Lake Junaluska, N.C., immediately following Connect, a Southeastern Jurisdiction meeting of Volunteers in Mission.

The Holston Conference organized the June summit after signing a covenant with the East Africa Annual Conference in February. The covenant includes plans for a new school and clinic, scholarship assistance, leadership development, mission teams and a missionary superintendent in Yei, Sudan.

Since June 11, the 906 churches of Holston Conference have raised $185,934 for Sudan, surpassing a 2008 goal of $125,000, and advancing toward a total $250,000 goal to be achieved by June 2009.

During the summit, Bishop Daniel Wandabula, resident bishop of the East Africa Annual Conference, spoke of how the money will be used. He also addressed the challenges of poverty, hunger, and underdevelopment in a region ravaged by 50 years of civil war.

"What we saw there was unacceptable," Wandabula said of southern Sudan, which he oversees along with the rest of Sudan, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Kenya. He thanked the Holston for its partnership and for "opening the doors for more partners to come in."

Forty summit participants shared information about other ministries in Africa, while considering Holston's invitation to join one of six mission trips to Sudan within the next nine months.

The Rev. Bradford Hunt of the North Central New York Annual Conference told of a community health care ministry organized by his church in Bor, Sudan. Southern Sudan Health Projects is an initiative of nine congregations and 15 Lost Boys who aim to empower local leaders in Sudan to address their own health needs. Hunt is pastor at Andrews Memorial UMC in North Syracuse, N.Y.

The Rev. Laverne Larson of the Wisconsin Conference spoke of traveling to Mbale, Uganda, each year since 2003 to train a class of 60 to 80 pastors. In 2009, her first class will graduate, after completing a curriculum based on the United Methodist Course of Study. Larson left the summit with a commitment to help the Holston Conference modify the curriculum for pastors in Yei, Sudan.

"I'm so appreciative that The United Methodist Church is finally doing something," Larson said. "To see how people are addressing this – there's so much cohesiveness, you can hear that God is really in this ministry." Larson is pastor of Viola and North Clayton United Methodist churches in Viroqua, Wis.

Participants of the Sudan Summit gather around a "prayer net" in the colors of Sudan, following a two-day meeting in which United Methodists shared passions and ideas for serving the people of south Sudan.

Members of the North Alabama and South Carolina Conferences came on fact-finding expeditions for their local churches and conferences. Ann Forgey of First UMC of Huntsville, Ala., left with a "sense of urgency to help these wonderful people [in Sudan]." Suzanne Jones attended the summit after leading her church, Trinity UMC in York, S.C., to raise $3,500 to help dig a well in Yei.

From the Virginia Conference, former Lost Boy Angelo Maker shared his testimony with an emotional audience, recalling how his mother and two brothers were fatally shot when he was seven years old and living in Rumbek, Sudan.

Maker, 28, and Ochan Hannington, 23, also provided information about southern Sudan's rainy season and culture as participants collaborated on future mission trips. Hannington is from Yei and is currently working at Camp Wesley Woods near Townsend, Tenn. Maker is a member at Williamsburg UMC, near his current home in Newport News, Va.

"I was aware that Holston Conference was doing some work in southern Sudan, but not to the level that I learned of this weekend," Maker said. "I wanted to offer my support and also do what I could to give them my insight."

Others providing hands-on information included Alberta McKnight and Sam Dixon of UMCOR, and Paul Turner, a Holston native of First Broad Street UMC who has lived in South Africa and now works as a conflict prevention officer for the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C.

McKnight and Dixon answered questions related to UMCOR's assistance with building a school in Yei. Turner agreed to help Holston develop communications and management structures to coordinate mission trips and participation of other United Methodist groups.

Bishop James Swanson of Holston announced that the Rev. Buford Hankins will be appointed to serve as Yei District superintendent in June 2009. Hankins and his wife, the Rev. Phyllis Hankins, will train local pastors and coordinate mission teams for a minimum of two years.

Phyllis Hankins echoed other Holston members when said she felt "overwhelmed" by the growing enormity of the ministry in Sudan.

"But hearing from these other people made me realize that all of this is not resting on our four shoulders," she said, motioning toward her husband. "It's a big relief to see these other conferences are already doing some things in Sudan and Uganda."

Some participants expressed concern that most of Holston's work is currently based in Yei and does not yet benefit more of southern Sudan. However, Wandabula encouraged the group to stay focused on Yei.

"We are open to extending our ministry, but I think first we must strengthen where we are," he said. "Let's consolidate our efforts."

Maker noted that even those participants not joining in the Holston effort can "take the message back" to their homes: The needs are great in southern Sudan.

"In a sense, if one location gets help, we all get help," he said. "I believe the message will get to the people in time." ■