

May 15 Edina: Strong voice behind ministry in south Sudan

Edina Tomalu walks seven miles each day to work at the United Methodist compound in Yei, Sudan. It is a job for which she receives no regular pay. At night, she takes orphans and widows into her home, missing meals so she can share her food.

At age 31, she is a worship leader and advocate for women and children for the United Methodist Church in south Sudan.

But for mission leaders of Holston and citizens of Yei, Tomalu might be the leader of the United Methodist Church in south Sudan.

"The males think they are the leaders of the church, but it's evident that they look to Edina a lot," said Danny Howe, chair of the conference mission team and two-time traveler to Sudan. "She has the respect of the community. And because she has that respect, she is bold in her leadership."

"She's the strongest woman I ever met," added the Rev. Jeannie Higgins, chair of Holston's Sudan Action Team and also a Sudan mission team veteran. "She's so self-sacrificing that I worry about her. But as long as her health holds out, Edina will be a key person in that village."

Faith and pain

Tomalu realized her calling as a teenager, when the pastor of an Anglican church asked her to pray aloud and assist with pastoral duties. Jealousy among the congregants led to a death threat. Her parents begged their 15-year-old daughter to stop her church work and come home.

Edina told her parents the story about Jesus, when his parents found him teaching in the temple. Then she told her mother and father:

"I will never come home. Father God has already called me in ministry. If I die in the ministry, bury me with joy. If I die of this world, you will lose me completely."

"My father said to my mother, 'Let her go.'"

Among her responsibilities today, Tomalu is a leader of worship, advocate for women and children and interpreter for United Methodists struggling to communicate in different languages.

She is thinner than when she greeted the first Holston mission team in 2006, and she complains of stomach pain. Higgins noted that Tomalu "buzzes from one thing to another," while remembering, like many Holston members do, a story about her tirelessness.

"I was involved in clergy training on my first trip to Sudan in March 2008," Higgins said of Holston's ongoing ministry with the East Africa Conference. "We were on a break, and Edina had several letters written by United Methodist Women from Holston to the women in Sudan. She wanted

to read them out loud to the women."

She read until Higgins became weary and wished Tomalu would stop.

"But she would not be hurried," Higgins said. "She sensed the importance of each letter. There must have been 50, and she didn't stop until she had read each one."

The mother of two children -- Nancy, 5, and Simeon, 3 -- Tomalu helped Salaam United Methodist School grow to its current maximum enrollment of 1,500 students with 18 teachers. ("Salaam" means "peace" in Arabic, Sudan's national language.) The United Methodist Committee on Relief financed the school's first building. Holston will pay for a second building with money raised through the annual conference offering.

Tomalu has also been a leader among those asking Holston to help the 19 United Methodist churches of south Sudan care for their widows and orphans. Holston's Libby Dearing is now championing the effort to develop a United Methodist children's home in Yei.

Tomalu speaks frequently, sometimes with frustration, of the people who come to her in need of food, shelter, education, safety.

"I have no answers for them," she said. "I know that only through Jesus, we can help them."

But she also speaks boldly of the role of women in developing a country scarred by war, disease, and poverty.

"This I tell you without fear: 75 percent of the church in Sudan are women," she told worshippers at Yei UMC in a service attended by Bishop James Swanson. "The women are the pillars of the church. We have great pain because we lost so many children in the war, but we also have great faith."

Spiritual gifts

When Tomalu first met Swanson during his trip to Africa in February, she was surprised and delighted to discover he is a black man.

"She just hugged me and said quietly, 'I didn't know,'" Swanson said.

Later, Swanson was impressed by the young woman's gift of interpretation. She translated Swanson's sermon for worshippers at Yei United Methodist church.

"What surprised me was not just her ability to interpret my words, but also my heart," Swanson said. "Every movement I made, she was in step with me."

Howe remembered how she laid hands on and prayed for the sick child who came to the temporary clinic set up by a Holston Mission team in February. When the infant Rafael died, Tomalu's language skills and relationships were crucial in arranging for the child to be quickly transported and buried next to his mother's grave, 22 miles away.

"She knew all the things that needed to be done to take care of that baby and his aunt, in an environment where I didn't know where to turn," Howe said.

Tomalu understands her people's suffering. Like many, she labored as a child and lived in a refugee camp after her home was attacked by the Sudan



Edina Tomalu: "I hear God whispering that we don't have to do it alone."

People's Liberation Army.

"It has cost me," she says, referring to years of hunger and hard work. She left the refugee camp at 18 when she saw soldiers brutalizing the residents.

"They would ask, 'Do you want to be happy?' If you said yes, they cut your lips to look as if you were always smiling," she says. "If you answered, 'No, I want to be sad,' they put a padlock on your lips."

Tomalu came to the United Methodist Church in 2001. She had learned to speak English well in the refugee camp, but was eager for more education. A friend told her, "There is another church. It is called Methodist. This church wants people, and this church wants to find people to go to school."

Tomalu got in on the ground level of the United Methodist Church of south Sudan, which had just been organized by the Rev. William Upendo. She was identified as an achiever and was appointed as the women's president.

"God planted his seed in me -- his spirit gives me wisdom," Tomalu explained. "What God put in me is unique, but it is not easy."

Since then, the church of south Sudan has experienced conflict as well as great success. Church leaders say Tomalu worked faithfully through it all, building relationships at first with the Western Pennsylvania Conference. That conference bought the first plot of land for the United Methodist compound.

Holston Conference followed in 2006 and has since signed a covenant with the East Africa Conference and sent seven mission teams to Yei. An eighth team is scheduled for November 2009.

"The response was put by God into Holston Conference to care for the needs of the people," Tomalu said. "I hear God whispering in my ear that

we don't have to do it alone."

Continuing education has not been possible for Tomalu, although Holston provides Africa University scholarships for young adults from Yei. However, the young woman with a big voice is already counted on to shepherd her community into a better future.

"She's helped the church stay focused on its goals, their vision, and the priorities they identified with Holston Conference," said Howe, referring to the covenant agreement that calls for education, health care and self-sustainability. "It's not always popular for women to have a leadership role in this country, but I sense she walks on some pretty solid ground." —Annette Spence

May 22 Commentary: Live on God's promises, not in fear of swine flu

Saying "yes" to God's call always involves laying one's life on the line. The risks are increased when that "yes" involves traveling several thousand miles to be in mission with people of a foreign land. God expects us to use common sense in minimizing the risks.

On April 27, four persons from Holston Conference left early in the morning to board a plane bound for Mexico. Our final destination was the Methodist Church of Ixtotec. This congregation, located in the extreme north of the Sierra Madre Mountains in the state of Puebla, frequently hosts a medical mission team from Holston. The church building is supplied by a single electrical circuit. Our team was an advance team that would install a new electrical supply just prior to the medical team's arrival.

On the day of our departure, Homeland Security indicated that travelers to Mexico should not cancel their trips, so we left expecting to be joined by the medical team later that week. The day before the medical team departed, Homeland Security issued a traveler's advisory to cancel all trips to Mexico. Physician Paul Brown, a member of Munsey Memorial UMC, and the Rev. Jim Dougherty, a retired pastor in Knoxville District, reluctantly called off the medical trip.

Even though we had heard of widespread swine flu cases in Mexico City, none had been reported in Puebla. The possibility of its spread to such a remote area (a seven-hour drive from Mexico City) seemed very low. So our advance team continued until we had completed the electrical work. We returned to the U.S. as soon as we could schedule a flight.

I would not have led a group into Mexico against the advice of our government authorities. If the mission had involved only me, I might have gone on if I felt that was God's calling. But, I had responsibility for three other lives, one of whom

had a young daughter. That child really worried about her daddy.

My reflections are not about the details of our trip, but the hysteria created by a pandemic that might rival the flu of 1918 and 1919. Yes, I am concerned about that possibility. Taking precautions are important. I would no more go to the nursing home to visit my 94-year-old mother than I would to go in with guns blazing as some deranged man did recently in a nursing home in North Carolina. Flu would be just deadly for those residents.

However, concern and worry are two different things. Jesus warned his disciples then, just as surely as he would warn us today, not to take anxious thought about tomorrow. Many may die in a flu pandemic. I could become a statistic in such an event. Nevertheless, I don't want to live out my years worrying about death to the point that I am paralyzed by fear and live in the shadow of death! Perhaps our economic recess has made our society more fatalistic as it faces the possibility of widespread death, but I choose to live my life in the context of the promises of God.

I want to live my life in the way suggested in a prayer found in our "Book of Worship," which I pray in services of death and resurrection. The last words of that prayer are:

Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

I encourage you, as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, to live out the essence of this prayer. Death is always with us, whether it be from swine flu or from some other cause. —Mack Turner

May 22 Camp staff exemplifies "no greater love" as summer season begins

After 28 years in camp ministry, Executive Director Randy Pasqua seems far from burned out. He's still wide-eyed as he watches his summer staff gear up for another season with first-aid training and Bible study.

Later in the evening, after a joyful session around the campfire, Pasqua stands to give the final prayer. The explanation for his unwavering passion for Holston Conference camping comes pouring out.

"You inspire me," he says, looking from face to face of the young adults gathered around him. "Your love for God, your love for each other -- you are the life of the church. And I am excited about the love you will share with the children this summer."

It was training week for 128 summer staff members of Holston Conference Camp and

Retreat Ministries. Gathered at Wesley Woods in Townsend, Tenn., the counselors learned how to perform CPR as well as how to sing a camp song at the top of their lungs. ("I've got my loonng joooooohns on...")

They also shared this year's camp theme through Bible study, fellowship, and worship in ways that seemed anything but obligatory. When they sing songs of praise or speak about the summer to come, the theme "No Greater Love" (John 15:13) is exemplified.

"I love being outside, love kids, love God," said Zack Edwards, when asked why he wants to be a counselor at Camp Dickenson this summer. "That 'bout says it all."

"We're motivated by the idea of what we're doing," said Kevin Spurlock, returning to the Dickenson staff for a second year.

"I'm just ready to love on some kids," said Susanna Grove, a first-time Wesley Woods worker.

There will be plenty of kids to love. About 3,200 total campers are expected at Camps Buffalo Mountain, Dickenson, Lookout, and Wesley Woods this summer. A total of 215 staff will work a nine-week season beginning June 1. First-year counselors receive \$170 pay per week, according to Development Officer Charles Maynard. An extra \$10 per week is earned with each year of service.

Many counselors have strong Holston Conference connections. Edwards is a rising sophomore at Emory & Henry College and a member of Mt. Olivet United Methodist Church in Wytheville District. Grove is active in the ETSU Wesley Foundation and a member at Cokesbury UMC in Knoxville District.

Alex Shaffer, a member at Mafair UMC in Kingsport District, said he never attended camp as a child. But as a participant in the UTK Wesley Foundation, he was inspired by a recruitment presentation given by Dickenson Director Michael Snow. Shaffer decided to give camp counseling a try (albeit at Buffalo Mountain, which is closer to his home).

Others discovered Holston camping through other channels. Jестie Higgins of Easton, Pa., chose to work at Camp Lookout after meeting Director Don Washburn at a United Methodist camping certification class in California this past January.

Several other camps tried to recruit Higgins, who has ministry experience in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. "But I knew I could benefit from being here in a conference with such a strong camping ministry," said Higgins, age 24. "I just wanted to come and be with good people."

When the campfire session was over and Pasqua had prayed over the group, the counselors all joined hands and followed each other into the dark, to a nearby field. Maynard explained that many of the young campers they'll encounter don't live in places dark enough to see the stars in the sky, another part of God's creation.

He pointed out a few stars and cited Psalm 8, as the counselors gazed heavenward:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. —Annette Spence