

By Annette Spence

KINGSPORT, Tenn. (UMNS) – In the summer of 2005, United Methodist Bishop James Swanson and his staff talked about possible mission projects they could pursue.

One staff member mentioned a book she had read over the weekend about the “lost boys” of Sudan. Swanson told of a photo e-mailed to him that morning showing a starving Sudanese child being watched by a nearby vulture. The bishop was haunted by the image and challenged staff in the Holston Conference to act.

On Feb. 23, less than three years after that routine Tuesday morning meeting, Swanson signed a covenant with Bishop Daniel Wandabula of the East Africa Conference that includes Sudan. The covenant also was signed by Bishop Felton E. May, interim top executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries.

The covenant formally establishes Holston as the first United Methodist conference or church to be in mission in south Sudan. The partnership will provide a school, clinic and other facilities in Yei, as well as educational assistance, church leadership development, volunteer labor and supplies.

Some fundraising already has provided land for the new facilities, pastors’ salaries, a physician and nurse, school equipment and two wells in south Sudan. In addition, Holston Conference commits to raising \$250,000 over the next two years – or \$125,000 each for Annual Conferences 2008 and 2009.

Missions celebration

The covenant signing was the centerpiece of a missions celebration held Feb. 22-24 at First Broad Street United Methodist Church in Kingsport, with the participation of Swanson, Wandabula and representatives from local and international agencies. The event also included workshops, worship services and planning meetings for First Broad Street members, conference leaders and others.



Mission team members sort out medications bound for Sudan.

Swanson said he had come to recognize that “the salvation of south Sudan is my salvation.”

“What’s killing the church is that people don’t see God in the church,” the bishop said at a luncheon prior to the covenant signing. “When people see the world changed in Jesus Christ, they believe in something beyond their own power. They say, ‘That’s a church I want to be part of.’ ... We’re not just in this to save the people of south Sudan, but we’re in this to save our own souls.”

Wandabula led workshops on the state of Sudan following 50 years of civil war, and the challenges of fostering discipleship in a country with more than 500 languages, ravaging disease, and the spread of Islamic and cultic influences. Also leading workshops were East Africa Conference staff members Muwaya Kubona David and Suuti Samuel. They used a triangle to demonstrate the “vicious cycle of ignorance, poverty and disease” that they hope the partnership will address.



Bishop Daniel Wandabula answers questions at a workshop.

“We know through the power of the Holy Spirit that God will continue to empower us, to give us the vision to be faithful to this partnership,” Wandabula said. “I am grateful that the Holston Annual Conference was the first conference to accept God’s call to come and work with south Sudan.”

Do something

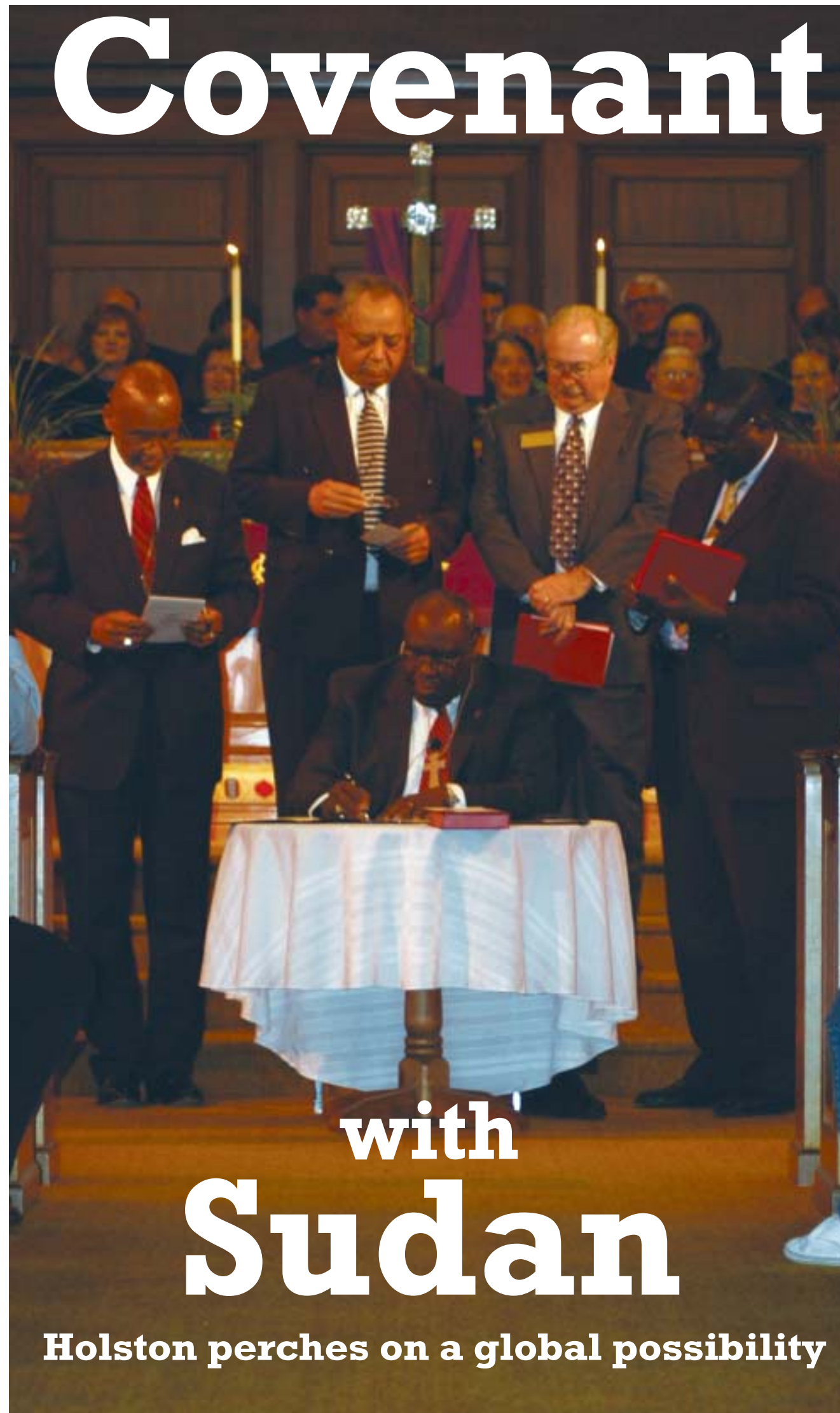
The famous vulture photo that troubled Swanson was taken in 1993 by Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Kevin Carter, who later committed suicide.

For many others in Holston Conference, the inspiration to “do something” about the plight of Sudan came from reading “They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky,” telling the true story of the hunger and displacement suffered by three “lost boys” after their homes were set on fire in Sudan. At ages 5 and 6, they crawled across desert land, begged for water and spent nights with soil as their beds. The children were among thousands who fled Sudan’s civil war in the late 1980s, some settling in the United States.

Holston’s former children’s ministry coordinator, Anita Henderlight, was the first to read the book and encouraged others to read it and join in the work of a newly created Sudan action team. The team’s goal was reflected in the campaign name “Hope for the Children of Sudan.”

Within months, a fund-raising effort had begun, and people from all over the conference asked to help. Coincidentally, Swanson’s office received an unscheduled visit by the district superintendent of Sudan and Uganda. The superintendent’s name was Daniel Wandabula, and a conversation between him and Swanson commenced. A few months later in May 2006, Wandabula was elected bishop of the East Africa Conference, which also includes Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Kenya.

By that time, Holston already had dispatched a three-person fact-finding team to Sudan. Caroline Njuki, representing the Board of Global Ministries’ Africa office, accompanied Holston’s first team to Yei in March 2006.



Holston perches on a global possibility

Bishop James Swanson (center) signs a covenant between the Holston Annual Conference and the East Africa Conference Feb. 23 during a missions celebration at First Broad Street United Methodist Church in Kingsport, Tenn. Witnessing the historic moment were (from left to right) Bishop Felton E. May, head of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries; Rev. Clark Jenkins, First Broad Street senior pastor; Rev. Fred Dearing, Kingsport District superintendent; and Bishop Daniel Wandabula, East Africa resident bishop.

“They were incredulous when Holston’s team arrived, because all the time, throughout the war, they felt abandoned by the church,” Njuki said, referring to the small United Methodist community in Yei, begun by a refugee from Uganda. “They had never had a visit from anyone outside. When the war was over, Darfur got all the publicity because the movie stars and politicians and media decided to get involved. ‘Where was the church?’ we heard again from the people in south Sudan. It took two days to bring about a reconciliation and connection with them, after the first Holston team came.”

As a result, when Holston contacted the Board of Global Ministries with a thirst to serve Sudan, the southern area was selected.

Today, the Yei District of Sudan includes 21 United Methodist churches, each with about 80 to 100 people. “With Holston Conference’s support, these churches could double in six months to a year,” said Wandabula. The bishop said the Sudanese are “hungry for the Word,” but also will be drawn to the church by medical attention and other services. “The church is the only hope for them,” he said.

“They have suffered so long, but they know the church and they love the church,” Njuki said. “They are growing because they don’t have anything else to show, except that they are committed to the community. With a little push, they’ll be on their way.”

Flipping the switch

Since 1994, the Kingsport church’s missions celebration has provided opportunities for adults, youth and children to participate in First Broad Street’s home repair, firewood, food and furniture ministries, as well as conference and denominational ministries. First Broad Street, with about 2,600 members and an average worship attendance of 840, is the fourth largest congregation in the Holston Conference.

This year, the celebration included workshops led by the Rev. Tom Hazelwood, head of the United Methodist Committee on Relief; John Hill, director of the economic and environmental justice, United Methodist Board of Church and Society; and Vicki Stephenson, mission management manager of the Red Bird Missionary Conference’s Henderson Settlement.



The Sudan Missions Team prepares for a March 10 departure.



Bishop James Swanson speaks at a celebration luncheon.

“Our church is on a journey,” said Danny Howe, church missions director and chairman of the conference’s missions ministry team. “We try to offer missions opportunities for our members year after year, including the children, because that becomes part of their DNA.”

Bishop May preached at a covenant service that included prayers for the 11-member team that would depart for Sudan on March 10. The team—which

includes teachers, a pharmacist and physician—also spent the weekend sorting medications and packing medical supplies for the Yei community. Additional teams will go to Sudan in fall 2008 and February 2009. The latter team will include Bishop Swanson.

“I pray that God will bless you and keep you,” May said to the upcoming Sudan team. “You can do it. You have the resources, you have the

wisdom, and you have Jesus.”

At other times during the missions event, leaders from the two partnering conferences sat on hard Sunday school chairs for long hours, discussing ways to provide homes for wandering orphans and teach self-sustaining skills to families without income.

“Very early on, as the Lord began to talk to our hearts, we were intimidated by the challenge. We were almost afraid to get started because there was so much to be done,” said Swanson.

“Even now, the more we get into it, the bigger it gets,” he said. The planning group decided to hold a Sudan Summit in summer 2008, inviting other United Methodist conferences or churches with interests in southern Sudan missions to participate. (E-mail connectionalministries@holston.org.)

Howe spoke of challenges of the past two years and the years ahead. “For us in America, in western culture, we’re used to flipping that switch and the light comes on. It’s so difficult for us to get into the mindset of not having a switch to flip for the light to come on.

“But folks, I’m here to tell you, if they didn’t need our help, we wouldn’t be there. We’re getting behind the leadership of the East Africa Conference, because they have a big picture and historical tradition. We have a small picture and a glimpse of what needs to happen.” ■