

NO LONGER STRANGERS BUT SISTERS AND BROTHERS IN CHRIST

Kiluba Nkulu

The United Methodist Publishing House (UMPH) has taken significant steps toward a new vision of partnership with annual conferences and local congregations of the United Methodist Church in the United States and overseas. The new vision encourages the development of partnership strategies relevant to the expansion of God's kingdom on earth in the twenty-first century. The "Gifts of Love to the People of Africa," a project of the UMPH, speaks to this vision and reflects a commitment to reaching out to Central Conferences. The "Gifts of Love" is an initiative to assist United Methodist congregations in Africa with priority church resources in support of their ministeries. It is an invitation to the United Methodist Church in North America to support Africa and affirm the idea that members of the UMC worldwide are no longer strangers but sisters and brothers in Christ.

A pilot project of the "Gifts of Love" is now being developed for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The outcomes of this pilot project will certainly have implications for the partnership not only between the UMPH and Africa, but also between United Methodist general agencies and boards and the rest of the Central Conferences.

Statistics leading to the 2004 General Conference indicate that Central Conferences represent 15.4% of the global membership of the UMC worldwide. Africa alone accounts for 12.7%—and the DRC 6.9%—of the global UM population. On the grounds of membership and geographical influence, the DRC has strategic importance for the spread of United Methodism on the African continent.

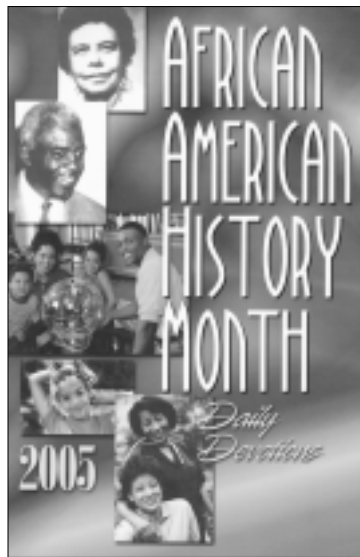
In terms of membership, the DRC has had the largest UM population in Africa, and that population continues to grow within Congolese national boundaries. During the last decade, the UMC of the DRC has also expanded to and established missionary districts in the neighboring United Republic of Tanzania and Republic of Zambia. In terms of geographical influence, the DRC has contributed to mission work in three linguistic zones of the UMC in Africa, namely the English, French, and Portuguese-speaking areas. Besides Tanzania and Zambia, ordained ministers and lay members of the UMC in the DRC have served, or continue to serve, as missionaries in Burundi, Algeria, Mozambique, Kenya and Senegal. Additionally, the Southern Congo Episcopal area has had a long history of collaboration with the UMC in

neighboring Angola. Ministers from Angola have served in Southern Congo and ministers from Southern Congo have served in Angolan congregations.

Life conditions in the DRC are in sharp contrast with the UM zeal for Christian mission there. Armed conflicts have destroyed or seriously damaged church infrastructure in all three Episcopal areas. Conflicts have also caused loss of human lives and contributed to social and economic misery throughout the country. Interviews with delegates to the 2004 General Conference reveal that UM men and women—clergy and laity—in the DRC (from the North to the South, and from the East to the West) continue to witness to the love of God for all and to the forgiveness of sin with enthusiasm, in spite of ongoing political uncertainty, social violence, and abject poverty.

The present political, social and economic situation has worsened life conditions in both rural and urban areas of the DRC. People are deprived of basic rights and struggle to survive. Many are employed but rarely receive wages. Families do not earn enough income to afford two meals a day, decent clothing, or good education for their children. Rural populations used to produce enough food to feed their families but insecurity and the ravages of war have

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Gifts of Love

"Gifts of Love for the People of Africa" is a benevolence project of UMPH. The purpose of this program is to learn from the African Church the resources that are most needed, and then invite U.S. United Methodists to provide them by making monetary donations.

This effort seeks to link resources with needs and people in North America with people in Africa. Ultimately, we expect to serve all of the annual conferences of Africa by delivering materials they have chosen, that in turn have been funded with assistance from all of the annual conferences of North America.

The first phase of "Gifts of Love" is a fundraising pilot focused on providing printed resource materials to the Central Congo Area, Southern Congo Area, and north Katanga Area.

For a free catalog outlining the program, call 1-800-672-1789 (item #GI4-520928).

—The United Methodist Publishing House

prevented them from tending their gardens or raising their livestock, causing so much suffering. Pastors do not receive adequate financial assistance from their parishes, so they end up splitting their time between ministry and other jobs—such as teaching full-time in primary or secondary school, tending a garden, fishing and the like—in a struggle for survival. Hardships in crowded cities and camps for displaced people or refugees have also put girls at the risk of prostitution for a loaf of bread, a bar of soap or a piece of valuable currency. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases is on a rise, but people cannot afford or do not have access to health services. All these problems, though not definitive, make the ministry there unique to the DRC, both daunting and inspiring—daunting because it is so desperate and inspiring because positive results are still possible.

In spite of the conditions described above, the UMC in the DRC has proven to have the resilience of a triumphant church. Pastors and lay workers have not capitulated in the face of material hardships. They continue to give themselves whole-heartedly to ministry, trusting the Lord will multiply the meager resources they have and enable them for effective outreach. Christians from North America who have recently traveled to the DRC on short-term mission opportunities have experienced first hand the level of resilience of the church there.

The challenges to effective church ministry mentioned above are not unique to the DRC. The situation in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi, Angola, and to some extent Mozambique (to name just a

few countries where the UMC is in mission) can be compared to the one prevailing in the DRC. All the named countries have experienced the effect of protracted wars: destruction of church, educational and health infrastructures; economic collapse; social unrest; chronic hunger; rise in illiteracy; and spread of diseases.

Some readers of this article may still not realize how connected the UMC has always been, since the Church somewhat appears disconnected and its commitment to global issues of social justice wavering. It is time now for the UMC to renew its commitment to mission and global justice. Responding to the appeal for "The Gifts of Love to the People of Africa" would enhance the vision of the church and demonstrate that United Methodists—whether in Africa, America, Asia, or Europe—are truly one and can pool their resources to meet the needs of the church mission in the world.

It is my hope that the "Gifts of Love to the People of Africa" will successfully reaffirm a commitment by United Methodists to help one another in making the church be a true image of God's presence in hurting communities. □



Kiluba Nkulu is a consultant for the "Gifts of Love" project (The United Methodist Publishing House). He has served as Swahili and French translator for the former United Methodist General Council on Ministries.