

We Thought We Had Been *Forgotten*

F. Herbert Skeete

The Council of Bishops (COB) approved a request from the Africa Central Conference for a one year convalescent leave for Bishop Jokomo, and the assignment of an interim bishop for one year. I was asked to go. In November 2002, my wife Shirley and I arrived in Zimbabwe to a warm reception by Bishop and Mrs. Jokomo and several Church leaders. We came to serve, but during the following year, we were spiritually inspired by the strong faith and spiritual commitment in the United Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. Many of the leaders expressed appreciation to the Council of Bishops for the appointment of an interim bishop; they said, "We thought we had been forgotten by the Church."

During my stay, I also visited the other two Central Conferences in Africa. Wherever I went, local churches are strong, vital, and growing. New congregations are organized every year. However they face many challenges. The churches

and annual conference leaders often serve in isolation because of lack of communication and transportation. Civil unrest may cause a local church and pastor to seek shelter in refugee camps. While the United Methodist Church in Africa enjoys the blessing of great growth, it suffers from poverty, civil war, and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. It is difficult for us in the United States to understand what our African brothers and sisters face each day. I have grown to deeply appreciate the sacrifices and commitments of pastors and my colleague Bishops who serve faithfully among personal dangers and often dehumanizing conditions.

The Africa Holistic Strategy program begun by the General Agencies of our Church is a good step forward in developing a comprehensive approach to assisting the fastest growing region of the UMC. Africa deserves the necessary investment of skills, training, and funds to develop a solid indigenous foundation for the Church. While we must respect the African cultures, we must also insure that the UMC in Africa is well grounded in Wesleyan theology and tradition.

The Council of Bishops could strengthen the leadership of newly elected Bishops in the Central Conferences in Africa by extending their orientation for at least three months. Their episcopal Colleges have no budget to meet for consultation and help from colleagues may be limited by communication and transportation problems. This extended time with another active Bishop from Europe or the United States would provide an opportunity to learn the complex structures of the worldwide Church and a chance to experience leadership options.

In addition to the involvement of the General Boards and Agencies, the involvement of local churches on both

sides of the Atlantic is very important. When we encountered a serious food shortage in Zimbabwe, we notified the United Methodist Committee on Relief. They responded immediately to enable us to purchase maize from South Africa for distribution through the local churches. The response among the congregations in Zimbabwe was amazing. Distribution was not determined by political party but by the needs of each family.

The Zimbabwe UMC and the Baltimore Washington Annual Conference have formed a partnership under the leadership of Bishop Jokomo and Bishop May. Out of those broader relationships, local church partnerships have developed. Wherever I went in Zimbabwe, I heard deep appreciation for these relationships; they have not been abandoned to face their struggles alone. And the gift to the U.S. congregations is that they glimpse what it really means to be a worldwide Church.

We are at a critical time. The investments of missions through many decades are now yielding bountiful harvests. If this opportunity is addressed creatively, the United Methodist Church in Africa will continue to respond to the education, health, social and spiritual needs of the continent. And God's rich blessings will surely flow both ways across the ocean! □

Holistic Strategies

General Conference 2004 approved what were called "holistic strategies" on mission in both Africa and Latin America. These efforts are being coordinated by the General Board of Global Ministries and involve other general agencies of the denomination. A sum of \$35 million for Africa will come from existing program budgets of the agencies involved.

The term "holistic strategies" emphasizes the need to interrelate the several aspects of mission, such as evangelism, service ministries, clergy and lay education, and ministries to children and youth. —*gbgm-umc.org*



Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, (retired) served as Interim Bishop of Zimbabwe 2002-2003.