

Methodist megachurch has deep pockets for Darfur: Congregation has given millions

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It's often hard to find signs of hope in Sudan's Western Darfur province, which is considered one of the bleakest places on the planet. Civil war rages in what many call a campaign of genocide that has killed hundreds of thousands of Darfuri civilians and displaced millions of others.

But while the Sudanese government in Khartoum has expelled most international relief groups, there are surprising signs of continuing aid from a United Methodist congregation half a world away.

"We see the purpose of the local church of going out into the world, being the hands and feet of Jesus to the hurting, the oppressed, the poor, and being the empowering center in that local community," said Mike Slaughter, lead pastor of Ginghamburg Church, which is located in Tipp City, a predominantly blue-collar suburb of Dayton, Ohio.

The church has partnered with the United Methodist Committee on Relief, or UMCOR, for its humanitarian work in Darfur. And since 2004 the congregation has committed \$4.4 million to those projects.

"Often the church remains silent in the face of injustice, whether it's slavery, segregation, genocide," Slaughter told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. "I want to lead a movement of people who want to make a difference, a God-difference, in the world."

About 4,500 attend services weekly at Ginghamburg Church, which puts it in the megachurch category. The congregation's donations have built 173 schools in Darfur that serve about 22,000 students. They've also sponsored a sustainable agricultural project, which has helped to feed an estimated 80,000 Darfuris. They've built water

systems to provide clean water and sanitation to more than 60,000, and they've begun microenterprises, such as a brick-making factory, to help fund the projects.

The programs are run by local staff members on the ground. Most Darfuris are Muslim, but Slaughter says his church is not seeking to convert them to Christianity. "Compassion doesn't have any strings attached," he said. "You serve people because they're human beings created in the image of God, loved by God."

Because of the security situation, it is difficult for outsiders to get into Darfur. But the Ohio church tries to send groups as often as possible to see the work firsthand. Pastor Slaughter led a delegation there last year.

"I share with my own family that I need to do this kind of experience," he said. "I need to get into where these people are, you know, in dangerous places, about once a year for my own soul-health, and I come back and realize what's important."

Slaughter believes that the Sudan work has had a profound impact on his church. When he proposed the first Darfur project at Christmastime in 2004, some people were apprehensive.

"I said, 'Hey, Christmas is not your birthday. It's Jesus' birthday.' . . . Christmas is one of the biggest hedonistic kind of self-focused materialistic feast. What would Jesus really desire? So I said, 'Whatever you spend on yourself, bring an equal amount for this agricultural project we're going to do in Darfur.'"

They raised \$318,000, and in the following year, Slaughter said, the project yielded 18 bags of food for every seed planted.

Slaughter said people have learned from the Darfur effort what a difference they can make. It's a lesson congregation members are learning at an early age. The children's programs hold special projects not just to raise money but to teach about life for kids in Darfur.

This past December the church's "Christmas Is Not Your Birthday" campaign raised about \$700,000 for Darfur. Slaughter was especially impressed because the community, which is heavily dependent on the automotive industry, has been hit hard by the recession. Unemployment in the Dayton area is running at about 15 percent.

However, the work in Darfur is not done at the expense of helping people locally. The church runs two community food pantries. While they were serving about 300 people a week last year, that number has now jumped to about 1,500 people a week, said Slaughter. The church also has a nonprofit arm called New Path that includes a car ministry, in which donated vehicles are repaired and given to the needy.

There's also Anna's Closet, which provides used clothing and shoes and actually makes money to support the Darfur work by selling items to those who can afford them. And there's JJ's Furniture, which provides household goods, especially to women coming out of situations of domestic violence.

The pastor of Ginghamburg Church believes that it has a holistic view of helping your neighbor, wherever that neighbor might be. "You need to look at the needs of your local community, your city, your country, and then out into the world as events continue to unfold in places like Darfur," he said. -*Kim Lawton, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*