

## REACHING OUT FOR CHRIST IN AFRICA



Many people associate Africa with war, violence, drought, famine, and a raging AIDS epidemic. The people of Africa have suffered a great deal. Since the 1980s life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa has declined 20 years due to HIV/AIDS. Infant mortality has increased dramatically. The 23 poorest countries of the world are all in Africa. Causes of the physical suffering include decades of slave trade, colonialism, corrupt post-independence regimes, droughts, the AIDS epidemic, and the debt crisis. Addressing these problems is extremely complex.

But what the secular media usually fails to report is the good news of Africa. In the midst of all the pain and suffering, there are amazing stories of faith and hope, resiliency and redemption that are unmatched anywhere. The spread of Christianity in Africa is unparalleled. It is estimated that in 2000 there were 380 million Christians in Africa, compared to 25 million in the 1950s.

The Reformed Church in America counts it a privilege to be part of this story. Since 1948, the RCA has sent scores of missionaries and volunteers to serve alongside African church partners to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to this promising but needy land. In addition, the RCA has funded projects, hosted African church leaders, granted scholarships, and appointed African mission program associates. Reformed Church World Service has sent hundreds of thousands of dollars of relief funds. The churches of Africa continue to ask the RCA to work with them in mission partnerships. The RCA considers it an honor to serve alongside these dynamic churches, which have much to teach others about persevering in an unswerving commitment to Jesus Christ.

The RCA seeks national church partners who are evangelical and ecumenical and who display a passion for social justice and evangelism. International partners such as the Evangelical Church of Niger are asked, "How can we come alongside you and help you bring the good news of the gospel in word and deed to your countrymen and women?" In some countries churches tell us, "We are doing well in evangelism, but we need assistance in developing programs and training to address the tremendous physical needs around us. We want to follow Christ's example of meeting spiritual and physical needs as we do evangelism." Therefore, many RCA mission personnel are working in the areas of health, literacy, agriculture, economic development, and education. Because we work with evangelical partners, evangelism is always integrated into these programs. In other contexts the churches ask RCA missionaries to help with frontline evangelism as well as training pastors and evangelists. The key is that the RCA responds to the requests of partner churches, and RCA mission personnel work under the direction of the national church. The RCA has never wavered in its policy, set back in the 1800s in China, to work with indigenous Christian denominations instead of starting new RCA churches around the world. In these partnerships, resources for ministry are always under the direction of the church partner.

Time and again, African church leaders have expressed appreciation for this way of doing partnership and have commented that this is not the norm in Africa, where many mission projects are directed from the West.

Because of the tremendous growth of Christianity in Africa, 40 percent of the continent is currently estimated to be Christian (with 45 percent identifying themselves as Muslims). However, the growth has not been evenly spread. There are still many areas where Christians are a small minority. The RCA has intentionally sought to develop mission partnerships in

these countries, where the church greatly needs outside personnel and support to reach out to a wide segment of the population. In two of the African countries where the RCA ministers less than 5 percent of the population is Christian.

## **ETHIOPIA**

The Reformed Church in America's work in Ethiopia began in 1964 when RCA missionaries were ordered to evacuate Sudan because of political instability and fighting. Because some of the projects were with people groups that straddled the Ethiopian/Sudanese border, some of the evacuated missionaries were able to continue their ministries in Ethiopia.

Like Sudan, Ethiopia has ancient ties to Christianity through Coptic Orthodoxy. It is estimated that 60 percent of the people are Christian and that 80 percent of these are Orthodox. Ethiopia has a sizable Muslim population and a number of adherents to local religions. After the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, a military government with a Marxist orientation ruled the country and placed restrictions on the activities of churches. Though the country is resource-rich in many ways, poverty is endemic. Ethiopia is ranked the fifth poorest country in the world by the United Nations.

The RCA's traditional church partner in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, is one of the largest denominations in Ethiopia and has strong Lutheran and Presbyterian roots. In 1977, political upheaval in Ethiopia forced most RCA missionaries to leave their ministries with Mekane Yesus, but some were allowed to continue serving (in very difficult circumstances) in Western Synod, where all but two churches were closed and many pastors were imprisoned by the Marxist government. Nevertheless, when the communist regime fell, it was found that the church had grown tremendously during the years of oppression. The church is very evangelistically oriented and has recently seen a great number of Muslims coming to faith in Christ. RCA missionaries and volunteers have served Mekane Yesus in the areas of health and education in an underserved area of the country where the government has failed to provide social services. Recently, RCA missionaries have helped develop a program in Christian-Muslim relations at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary.

In 1996, the RCA began a new relationship with Kale Hiwot National Church of Ethiopia among the Daasanach people in southwest Ethiopia. Kale Hiwot is the largest Protestant church in Ethiopia and was established by the SIM mission agency. The RCA had been working with the Daasanach people (then called the Geleb) before 1977, the year the communist government forced missionaries to evacuate the Omo River region. The church was in its infant stages at that time, so when the opportunity presented itself 20 years later to again become involved in the area, the RCA welcomed the chance to restart this work. The project is now focused on windmill irrigation and church planting. Kale Hiwot is supplying the evangelists and RCA the technical expertise. The Daasanach people have welcomed this project, which addresses their urgent need for food and security, and they have shown an interest in the gospel.

## **KENYA**

The story of RCA's mission work in Africa has often followed the seemingly continuous political upheavals experienced on the continent. When RCA missionaries had to evacuate Ethiopia because of the communist overthrow, some of them crossed the border into Kenya to continue their work among the Daasanach people residing there.

Kenya's population of more than 36 million includes over 70 distinct ethnic groups. The limited amount of cultivable land has encouraged the population to concentrate in those areas, with the result that 75 percent of the people live on 10 percent of the land. Kenya gained independence from Great Britain in 1963. About 80 percent of the population is Christian. There is a strong Muslim influence on the coast and in the northeast.

The Africa Inland Church (AIC) serves as the RCA's partner church in Kenya. The largest Protestant church in the country, the AIC is the result of the work of the Africa Inland Mission (AIM) and is still closely tied to AIM. At the invitation of the AIC, the RCA agreed to undertake two projects in areas where the AIC wanted to work but could not provide personnel or funds. These joint AIC-RCA projects—among the Pokot people in Alale and among the Orma in Waldena, Titilla, and Daba—are among unreached peoples. The projects focus on evangelism and on community development, which includes health, agriculture, animal health, income generation, water development, and education. Because the Africa Inland Church has a strong mission program, both projects have increasingly come under the direction of indigenous staff. The Orma project is now staffed entirely by Kenyan missionaries, and the last western RCA mission staff person handed the Pokot project over to nationals in 2002. The RCA's relationships with and support of these projects will continue, along with thanks for the success stories that enable us to redeploy personnel and financial resources into new, more underserved areas.

St. Paul's United Theological College, another RCA mission partner, trains students for ministry in the church and society. Its diverse student population comes from a variety of church traditions and from countries across Africa. RCA missionaries help with the school's administration and teach classes in economics, theology, sociology, psychology, and pastoral care for HIV/AIDS patients.

In early 2007, the RCA entered into partnership with the Maasai Outreach Mission, an indigenous church started in 1984 that desires to minister to and bring change within the community. The Maasai people live in the Great Rift Valley of Kenya and Tanzania. One of the specific problems they are striving to address is the immense need for clean water. The RCA is partnering with them to build wells, which make it possible to irrigate land for growing crops and to keep livestock from perishing. A readily available water supply also means that when the Maasai were previously searching for water, they now have time for education.

## **MALAWI**

Malawi is a small landlocked Central African state extending along Lake Malawi. The economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture and the country is self-sufficient in food production, but life is hard—many live in overwhelming poverty, and the average life expectancy is only 43 years. All indigenous people groups are of Bantu ethnicity.

Malawi is known to be the "warm heart" of Africa and its people have been some of the most receptive to Christianity on the African continent. Eighty percent of its people are Christian. Church of Scotland missionaries and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa pioneered mission work in Malawi in the late 1800s, resulting in the establishment of a strong national church, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), which is the largest Protestant denomination in the country.

The CCAP is the RCA's church partner in Malawi, where we work with Nkhoma Synod. CCAP requested assistance from the RCA in developing their diaconal ministry. In partnership with

Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, RCA mission personnel assist communities in developing literacy, agriculture, health, and income-generating projects that have evangelism and discipleship components.

In response to the AIDS epidemic, the RCA began partnering with Save Orphans Ministries. In partnership with Christian World Relief Committee, RCA mission personnel serve as consultants to this organization, which helps families and communities care for children orphaned by AIDS.

## **MOZAMBIQUE**

Located in southeast Africa, Mozambique is a sparsely populated country of 309,493 square miles (801,590 square kilometers)—slightly less than twice the size of the state of California. It was a Portuguese colony for 470 years and gained independence as a Marxist Leninist state in 1975. Mozambique is one of the world's poorest countries, the result of centuries of colonial negligence, over hasty application of Marxist economics, and 30 years of guerilla warfare. At the height of the civil war in 1992, 40 percent of its people were refugees and a million lives were lost. The depth of poverty is illustrated by the child mortality rate: 15 percent of children born in Mozambique don't live to see their fifth birthday. The government policy from 1975 to 1982 was to eliminate all churches and "religious superstitions." Christians suffered tremendously. Religious freedom was granted in 1990 and has resulted in healthy church growth—40 percent of Mozambicans now identify themselves as Christians.

The Reformed Church in Mozambique is the RCA's partner church in Mozambique. It is a small church that survived the difficult years of communist persecution. It is very "resource poor" because of the persecution it went through, but it wants to address the urgent needs of the people living in poverty. In partnership with Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, RCA mission personnel assist the Reformed Church in Mozambique in implementing community development programs that address the needs of the poorest of the poor. Literacy training is a high priority as only one in five women in Mozambique can read; agricultural, health, and economic development needs are also being addressed. Evangelism and Christian teaching are essential components of the projects.

## **NIGER**

Most of this large western-Africa state is part of the Sahara Desert. Only the southwest region and a narrow strip along the Nigerian border in the south are savannah grasslands. In the 1980s the Sahel famine, the collapse of the uranium market, and Nigeria's closing of its common border with Niger devastated the economy. Niger ranks 177th—absolutely last—on the United Nations' human development index. Ninety percent of the population works in agriculture, which is plagued by frequent droughts. Spiritually, the country is also needy. Christians are an extreme minority of the population. The country is 80 percent Muslim, but there is religious freedom. Niger is a secular state that gained independence from France in 1960. Some political instability has resulted from the economic crisis and military coups.

In 1999 the RCA began a partnership with the Evangelical Church of Niger (EERN). The EERN was founded by the SIM mission agency, though they no longer have an official relationship. Most EERN members are converts from Islam and speak Hausa. EERN had no church partnerships and greatly appreciated the RCA's model of church-to-church partnerships in which RCA missionaries serve under the direction of the national church. The RCA likewise appreciated the EERN's vision for establishing a church in every village in the country while seeking to meet the needs of people

who are poor. The church has done impressive community development work such as well drilling with assistance from two other RCA partners, Church World Service and Bread for the World. The RCA sponsors mission personnel who instruct pastors in community development at the EERN's Bible school. RCA mission personnel are also engaged in health services and agricultural development.

In partnership with Wycliffe Summer Institute of Linguistics, the RCA serves the counseling needs of missionaries serving all across Africa. RCA mission personnel counsel families experiencing not only the wide range of difficulties that North American families face, but also those unique to missionary service, such as working in locations where violence, political instability, and famine are widespread. As Africa becomes an increasingly dangerous place to minister in, a larger proportion of the counseling is directed at debriefing evacuees and counseling for post-traumatic stress syndrome. Many missionaries and national church personnel are able to continue to serve the church of Christ in Africa in the midst of personal or family trauma because of the professional counseling services the RCA supports.

African churches can be an inspiration to American churches. African Christians do not spend a lot of time theorizing about word and deed—they live it! Mainline African churches have a great commitment to integrate social justice and evangelism. The same churches that advocate for debt relief, struggle for racial justice in the aftermath of apartheid, initiate programs for peacemaking, and advocate for multi-party democracy also do amazing evangelism. African Christians have a commitment to the gospel, a sense of community, and an awareness of the gospel's call for justice that enriches the church everywhere. Samuel Odunaiki of the Nigerian Evangelical Fellowship suggests one contribution the African church can make: "If Europe gave the world modern missions and the United States gave the twentieth century the impetus for world evangelization, let Africa rise today and offer the world a model for the local church." Africa is a place where Christianity is on the march, where the church is growing faster than anywhere else in the world, and where the church of the future may look for inspiration and new direction.

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

South Africa is a large state on the tip of the continent that experienced decades of bloodshed and turmoil before apartheid was ended in 1994. At that time, a multi-party democracy was established. The country is resource-rich and is the wealthiest and most industrialized country in Africa. Even with the steady improvements since achieving a true democracy in 1994, there is still great disparity between the races, and unemployment among blacks is very high. The country is 80 percent Christian with the major denominations being Methodist, Pentecostal, and Reformed. The churches were actively engaged in the anti-apartheid movement and are presently working diligently at racial reconciliation.

The RCA has been in partnership with the black Reformed churches in South Africa throughout their long struggle against apartheid. Many RCA members were faithful advocates, pressuring legislators in the United States and Canada to take a strong anti-apartheid stance. As apartheid collapsed and a new denomination, the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), was formed, the two denominations wanted to continue the partnership but with a new focus: addressing the "scars of apartheid" through development of a denomination-wide diaconal program. The focus of this program is economic development, housing, education, and AIDS intervention. In partnership with Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, jointly sponsored mission personnel serve as consultants to the URCSA Diaconal Commission. The RCA has much

to learn from the URCSA regarding racial reconciliation and church-based community development.

## **SUDAN**

When the RCA sent its first missionaries to Africa in 1948, it joined with Presbyterian missionaries in Sudan. For most of its modern history, Sudan has been under the control of either Egypt or Great Britain. After a long struggle, Sudan gained independence in 1956. Persistent tension between the north and the south has resulted in periodic conflicts between the military, dominated by the north, and rebel groups from the south. Sudan is ruled by a fundamentalist Islamic government that has been responsible for numerous human rights violations directed against Christians and moderate Muslims. But in the face of persecution, there has been tremendous growth of the Christian church.

In Sudan, the RCA's partner denomination is the Presbyterian Church of Sudan (PCOS). For many years, RCA mission personnel were involved in training pastors, their spouses, and Christian educators at Nile Theological College. Nile is one of the few institutions training leaders to fill the serious leadership vacuum experienced by this rapidly growing church. Currently, RCA personnel are involved in directing a Theological Education by Extension program, which trains church leaders who are not able to attend the theological college.

In Sudan, the RCA also has a relationship with the New Sudan Council of Churches, which includes a wide range of churches and is directly engaged in many development and Christian education projects as well as relief work and peace advocacy throughout the liberated area of Southern Sudan. The NSCC has organized peace conferences throughout the south, in which Christians take the lead in bringing communities together to pledge to stop the violence and return abducted adults and children as well as cattle. This movement has been internationally recognized as one of the few movements that has produced a lasting peace. This is due largely to the commitment of Christians at the grassroots levels to follow the Prince of Peace in a ministry of reconciliation.

In the aftermath of the civil war, RCA missionaries work with Sudanese church leaders through RECONCILE (the Resource Centre for Civil Leadership). RECONCILE is the program arm of the NSCC designed to promote reconciliation, trauma healing, and civic education.

RCA mission personnel also work for ACROSS, an organization focused on empowering the churches of Southern Sudan. ACROSS is an essential contributor to the rebuilding of Sudan's infrastructure with programs that address issues of food security, health, evangelism, and education.

## **YOU CAN BE A MISSION PARTNER IN AFRICA**

There are many ways you can become a partner in the worldwide mission of the Reformed Church in America:

- Commit to a Partnership-in-Mission share.
- Include the RCA mission program in your will.
- Make designated or undesignated gifts.
- Serve as an RCA mission volunteer.
- Assist your classis in forming a partnership with an RCA global church partner.

- Commit to pray for RCA missionaries and church partners.

For more information about any of these ways to support RCA mission, please contact Nancy Ellens at [nellens@rca.org](mailto:nellens@rca.org) or (800) 968-3943.

To donate to support a missionary or mission project, mail your check—made out to “Reformed Church in America” and with the memo line clearly designating the project or missionary you would like to support—to Reformed Church in America; P.O. Box 19381; Newark, NJ 07195-1938 or, in Canada, to Regional Synod of Canada; 201 Paradise Road N., Hamilton, ON L8S 3T3.

Donations for many mission projects can be made online. Visit the RCA donation page, [www.rca.org/give](http://www.rca.org/give), and click on “Missionaries,” “Featured Projects,” or “Reformed Church World Service” to find mission projects that need your support.

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