



When Hope Shows Up

Advent is my favorite time of the church year. By definition it is a season of expectancy and anticipation. Indeed, the first candle of the Advent wreath is often called the hope candle, a sensory reminder of our longing for better days and brighter prospects.

Hope is the frame through which I choose to interpret my recently completed trip to Congo. The alternative is despair.

Our largest international sister church is the Congo Covenant Church, known as the CEUM. We began work there in 1937. Today there are some 1,500 churches, ninety medical clinics, four hospitals, and a school system serving 65,000 children. The scope and scale of what has developed over the years is truly impressive. Even when instability in Congo during the 1990s caused us to pull back our missionary staff, the CEUM continued its dramatic growth. Mossai Sanguma, president of CEUM, estimates that the work of the church touches more than one million lives with the hope of Christ. At the invitation of the CEUM, the we are now re-deploying missionary staff to Congo. A team of six is getting settled in right now.

Congo is one of the three poorest countries in the world according to the United Nations. It is also torn by brutal civil strife.

We work largely in the rural northwest section of Congo, the Équateur Province. The area is reasonably stable these days, due in part to its relative isolation from the east where there is bare-knuckled conflict, intensified by discoveries of vast quantities of precious metals. Eastern Congo is a particularly horrific place for women, where rape has become both a physical and psychological weapon of war.

The crippling effects of the conflict clearly reverberate throughout the country. Medicines are in frighteningly short supply. Children are dying needlessly from preventable diseases. Most roads are virtually impassable rutted paths; bridges are little more than rotting boarded planks. Electricity is spotty, even at the hospitals. Spare parts to repair vehicles are difficult to obtain, assuming there are tools to do the work. Classrooms are overcrowded, with instruction done on chalkboards—if there is chalk to be had—not from textbooks. Poverty is grinding. Our Congolese

friends are indomitable, capable, and resourceful. It's just hard to make bricks without straw.

Yet everywhere our team went we were met by massive, enthusiastic throngs. In some cases thousands lined grass airstrips cut by machete. I asked Curt Peterson, our executive minister of world mission, to explain this overwhelming reception. He said it was partly due to Congo's hospitality culture and partly due to curiosity (in some remote locations they had not seen a plane or a Westerner in years). But mainly he said it was due to the hope our visit represented.

More than the words we spoke, our very coming engendered among our Congolese friends the knowledge that others believe in their future and stand with them. In our visit they heard this message: "We are not overlooked. Our committed sisters and brothers in Christ value us."

You see, hope shows up when people who care show up.

This is the very nature of the gospel. The gospel always runs toward the need, not away from it. In Advent, we celebrate that Jesus did not leave us in our need but through the incarnation became Immanuel, God with us. At every point, that same Jesus calls us to go to the needs around us, not to hide in isolation.

This Advent we ask, where does hope show up because I show up? To what challenging circumstance is God calling you? Where can your very presence be a source of hope to others?

In God's economy when we enter those places, our own hope and resolve grow in turn. In one pediatric ward in Congo I saw an infant the same age as my granddaughter. The baby was stricken with malaria, strapped to an IV, cuddled by her mother, fighting for her life. I had been taking preventative medicine, but she had no such access even though her risk was infinitely higher than mine.

I was faced with a choice, as articulated by a friend: I could get mad *at* God and despair about anything ever changing. Or I could get mad along *with* God, and join in God's anger to make things right in this broken world. In the Covenant we get mad along with God. It's a much more hopeful way to live. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Hope is the frame through which I choose to interpret my recently completed trip to Congo. The alternative is despair.