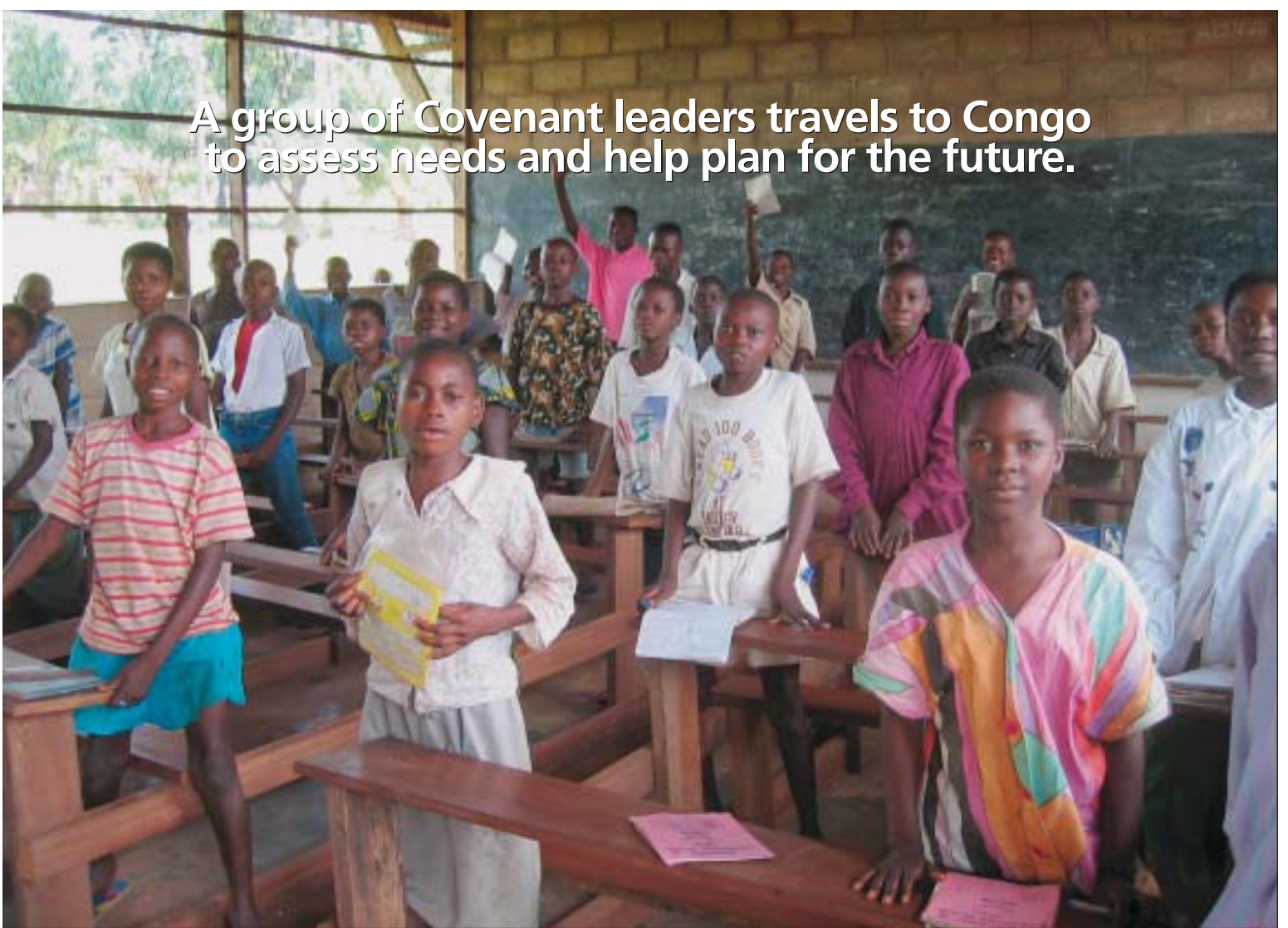


A group of Covenant leaders travels to Congo to assess needs and help plan for the future.



‘We cannot walk away from them’

DONALD L. MEYER

They have every reason to be disillusioned, discouraged, despondent, and disheartened following more than seven years of war and disease that have claimed the lives of more than three million people in this nation of 56 million.

They are the people of the Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM), living in a country where sustaining life itself is a daily struggle, with inadequate water

supplies, virtually no electrical power, marginal housing, poor roads, and rampant disease. Infants and adults alike die each day from maladies that would be treatable if proper medical care was available.

In the midst of all their suffering, the people of the CEUM still have joy, and the smiles on their faces radiate the love of Christ and reflect the legacy of more than sixty-six years of faithful

ministry by missionaries of the Evangelical Covenant Church and those who have risen to lead the Covenant Church of Congo.

“You couldn’t see the suffering in their faces,” said Curt Peterson, executive minister of world mission and part of a five-member delegation that

Donald L. Meyer is executive minister of Covenant Communications and editor of the *Companion*.

visited Congo in November. “I was inspired by the resilience and joyful faith of the believers in Congo . . . especially evident in the joy they express in the midst of suffering during seven years of turmoil.”

“It worked,” says President Glenn Palmberg in evaluating the impact of the Covenant’s work in Congo. “All the effort and sacrifice has paid off in a wonderfully strong, vibrant church that has made an enormous difference, not only in the lives of people now, but in terms of salvation and the message of Jesus Christ.”

Palmberg and other group members were awestruck by the vibrancy



President Glenn Palmberg greets waiting crowd in Bumba.

of the Congo church, which has continued to grow in the years since Covenant missionaries were forced to evacuate the country in 1996 due to civil unrest.

“The faith of the Congo church and its people is strong,” says Palmberg, who led the delegation that also included Jim Sundholm, director of Covenant World Relief; Jerome Nelson, a Central Conference coordinator; and Bob Thornbloom, a Covenant missionary who coordinates technical support in Congo. The group was joined in Congo by Gbuda Luyada, president of the CEUM; Pete Ekstrand, regional coordinator for Africa; and Keith Gustafson, country coordinator for the Democratic Republic of Congo.

One of the reasons for the church’s strength, Palmberg believes, is the generous mixture of faith and acts

A Martyr to the Cause of Christ

A SIMPLE WREATH marked the grave where slain Covenant missionary Dr. Paul Carlson was buried almost forty years ago.

The wreath paid tribute to one considered a martyr to the cause of Christ, one who laid down his life for his friends in Congo. President Glenn Palmberg, tears filling his eyes, spoke of the sacrifice and legacy of a man whose example has sparked renewed momentum for expanded outreach to the poorest of the poor among us—the people of the Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM)—and eventually to others around the world. (See sidebar for the text of Palmberg’s comments.)

Carlson, a Covenant medical missionary who served at the medical station in Wasolo, Congo, was killed in 1964 following his imprisonment in Kisangani, formerly known as Stanleyville. He had returned to Wasolo to care for his patients following the evacuation of Covenant missionaries from Congo due to civil unrest and political instability.

Palmberg and CEUM President Gbuda Luyada placed the wreath at Carlson’s grave in Karawa during a November visit by a five-member delegation representing the Evangelical Covenant Church. The group also visited the prison cell where Carlson was held as well as the route he took in an ill-fated effort to escape as Belgian paratroopers stormed Kisangani in an attempt to free the prisoners.

“The service at the cemetery was particularly moving to me as I could tell that the Congolese were deeply touched by Dr. Paul’s sacrifice,” says Pete Ekstrand,

regional coordinator for Africa, who notes that the Congolese repeatedly give thanks to the Lord for sending the missionaries to bring them the good news of Jesus.

“Glenn remembered the devotion and sacrifice of Paul and other missionaries who gave their lives,” said Curt Peterson, executive minister of world mission who was also a member of the delegation. “Their example is a challenge for us to live our lives and devotion to bringing the gospel to all people.”

A celebration of the life of Paul Carlson will commence this year, with the 119th Annual Meeting in Minneapolis reflecting the year-long theme of “Bearing the Marks—A Call to Discipleship” that is inspired by the sacrifice of Carlson and other Covenant missionaries. One highlight of the meeting will be the unveiling of a new documentary on the life of Carlson, containing some never-before-published material.

The celebration continues in the fall with a four-Sunday emphasis on discipleship, October 31 to November 21, culminating on November 24, the anniversary of Carlson’s death. Resources to be distributed to Covenant churches include “sermon seeds” to assist sermon preparation, a multigenerational curriculum suitable for use in Sunday-school classes or small group studies, and copies of the documentary for local congregations.



of compassion that have characterized Covenant ministry in Congo from its inception in 1937.

“Compassion without salvation would not have been as great a contribution,” Palmberg says. “If we had only gone in with medical assistance and education and not with the evangelistic piece, we would have made a difference, but it would be temporary and not as significant. The work in Congo is a clear example of evangelism and compassion walking hand in hand.”

The Congo church’s “Christ-centered faith and hope,” as Peterson puts it, has been particularly important in sustaining the church not only during the years of civil war, but through times of pain and suffering as the result of inadequate food, numerous diseases, and primitive living conditions.

“It is almost New Testament-like to see the suffering and how they have



Karawa schoolchildren are intrigued by a digital camera image.

remained focused on their call in life as believers,” Peterson says. “I thought of my parents and others like them, who for sixty-six years prayed for and supported our Covenant mission in Congo—and look at the fruit of that faithful commitment over the years.”

The fruit to which Peterson refers are the 170,000 believers in the Congo church, the 40,000 children who attend

school each day, and the three hospitals and seventy-three medical clinics that may lack in equipment and medicine, but continue to minister to the health needs of the people as best they can.

The resourcefulness of the people of Congo in the face of extreme deprivation also inspired the delegation. “I was amazed at how resourceful and undaunted they are...such limited resources and yet they were creating all they needed to move forward with their lives,” Peterson says. Like the small flashlight casing that had been gutted and refitted to serve as a microphone, or the way in which they hooked up old radios and boomboxes to serve as loudspeakers for their sound systems.

“Here, we just go out and buy more things if we have a need,” Peterson says. “They are creating anything they need to get by.”



The faithful gather for worship in Goyongo.

The generosity of the people in the midst of scarcity is another indicator of a healthy faith and a healthy church, both Palmberg and Peterson point out.

“I was challenged by the self-giving and generous spirit of the people who have so little,” Peterson says, likening their attitude to that of the church at Macedonia—“they first gave to the Lord and then to us.” Families in the various areas the delegation visited provided the best of their hard-won food stores to feed their guests. But, their generosity has extended beyond sharing their resources.

In the midst of the ravages of war, the Congo church has reached out to share its faith with the most despised group in the Congo culture, the Pygmies, sending missionaries to share the good news of faith in Christ. What joy the Congo people experienced when the Pygmies joined with them for a worship service at the Covenant church in Bumba, Peterson noted.

“I almost get the feeling of an inverse relationship between what they have and their gratitude and gratefulness,” Palmberg says. “They have a personal relationship with God. We can learn a lot from a faith that endures, even thrives in the face of persecution.”

It is the compassion piece that needs to be a key focus for the immediate future, says Palmberg, who quickly acknowledges the challenge in responding to overwhelming needs and providing significant resources.

“Coming out of a western culture and way of thinking, we need to learn how to work cross-culturally, recognizing that in spite of good intentions, we can do things that are not appropriate or helpful. We cannot, however, allow the fear of mistakes to deter us from our goal.”

And what is that goal? Palmberg sees at least six major areas requiring attention:

- medical: staff, training, equipment, medicines,
- education: teachers, supplies, improved facilities,

Remembering Paul Carlson

During a recent visit to Congo, President Glenn Palmberg of the Evangelical Covenant Church and President Gbuda Luyada of the Covenant Church of Congo laid a wreath at the grave of martyred missionary Dr. Paul Carlson. Here is the text of Palmberg's comments from the graveside.

IT IS NOW ALMOST exactly thirty-nine years since Paul Carlson was buried here. His remains have spent more time in this cemetery than he spent on this earth.

Paul Carlson died because he loved Jesus and because he loved brothers and sisters who are also children of God. It is our calling to follow his example. It does not mean a premature death for most of us, but it does mean a kind of love for one another that will sacrifice. We know of a number of people and a number of things that have been done because of the life and example of Paul Carlson. But there are many people that we do not know about who have been influenced or called by God through his life and his death.

It is our calling and responsibility to never forget the sacrifice that Paul Carlson made, or to forget the incredible loss to his family and his friends. The needs that brought him to the Congo and caused him

to fall in love with the people of the Congo are just as urgent today. We show our true respect for him by picking up the same cause that motivated him.

God is calling those of us in this generation to live out that same passion. We will commemorate the fortieth anniversary of his death with lots of ceremony and celebration. But let us also observe it with renewed commitment and sacrifice. It broke his heart to see the suffering of his brothers and sisters. May our hearts be broken as well.



- economic development: help market local products to generate income,
- infrastructure: develop roads, electrical power and good water sources,
- construction: build schools, repair hospitals, and
- food: expand the supply and improve distribution methods.

“At first it overwhelmed me,” Palmberg says of his assessment of the needs. “I felt a sense of despair—the task is too large and hopeless. However, the more time I spent there, the more I began to realize that small things make a difference. I became more energized

and passionate about the opportunities in Congo to do great things for God.”

And after several weeks of reflection on his experience, Palmberg's message to the church here is clear.

“We Christians in Covenant churches have the resources to come alongside the CEUM and make a significant difference,” he says. “They also have much to contribute to the life and faith of the Covenant. This is not all about us helping them—it is both about helping and receiving out of our faithfulness. Our church will be a healthier

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

‘We cannot walk away’

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

church if we come alongside our brothers and sisters and give of what God has given us.”

That sentiment is echoed by Peterson. “We will stand by our brothers and sisters in Congo in their time of need,” he says. “We will partner with the CEUM. They are strong. They have a good leadership team. We want to say to them, ‘We’re here alongside you to find the necessary strength in God—we’re not here to be that source of strength.’ Just as David and Jonathan in the Old Testament story renewed their covenant of friendship, I told the Congolese that this is the reason we are here as well—to renew our covenant of friendship and partnership.”

The focus on Congo is the starting point for a renewed emphasis on the mission of evangelism and compassion around the world, Palmberg says. It is not the only place where God is calling the Covenant to work, he says, but, given the strong relationship and the historical ties between the Congo church and the church in North America, it is an important place to begin.

“The people in the [North American] Covenant church have the passion—they care deeply,” Palmberg says. “They need to be connected with the need in a way that makes a difference, and that’s our calling. We can, we should, we must do more than just ministry in Congo, but we cannot do less. These are our brothers and sisters. We cannot walk away from them.” □

Want to help?

Churches and individuals that want to help address the needs in Congo are asked to contact Pete Ekstrand, regional coordinator for Africa. He can be reached at ekstrandwm@earthlink.net.

Because of the immense needs in Congo, and the number of Covenant-

ers who wish to respond, coordinating those efforts is an essential task. With these potential pitfalls in mind, the Congo Roundtable, of which Ekstrand is a key member, was created to help coordinate volunteer efforts and trips to Congo. “We need to make visits meaningful and be good stewards of everyone’s time and resources,” says Curt Peterson, executive minister of world mission.

It’s also essential that the responses be well thought out, Peterson says, to ensure that they have a positive impact on the situation in Congo.

“Good intentions are not enough,” he says. For example, visits by church teams from North America require time and expense on the part of the hosts,



expending resources that already are in short supply. Well-intentioned statements of encouragement can easily be misconstrued as promises of aid that the visiting group never intended to convey. Assistance can inadvertently develop into a new form of dependency, which can be counterproductive to the movement towards self-sufficiency.

“We will work with the CEUM (Covenant Church of Congo) in partnering ways that empowers their leadership and gives dignity to the distribution of resources, and at the same time avoids creating unhealthy dependencies and the appearance of control,” Peterson says. □

The Congo Report

FOR DAILY ARTICLES AND PHOTOS published in the online Covenant news report while the delegation was traveling in Congo, visit www.covchurch.org and select “The Congo Report” under the new features section.