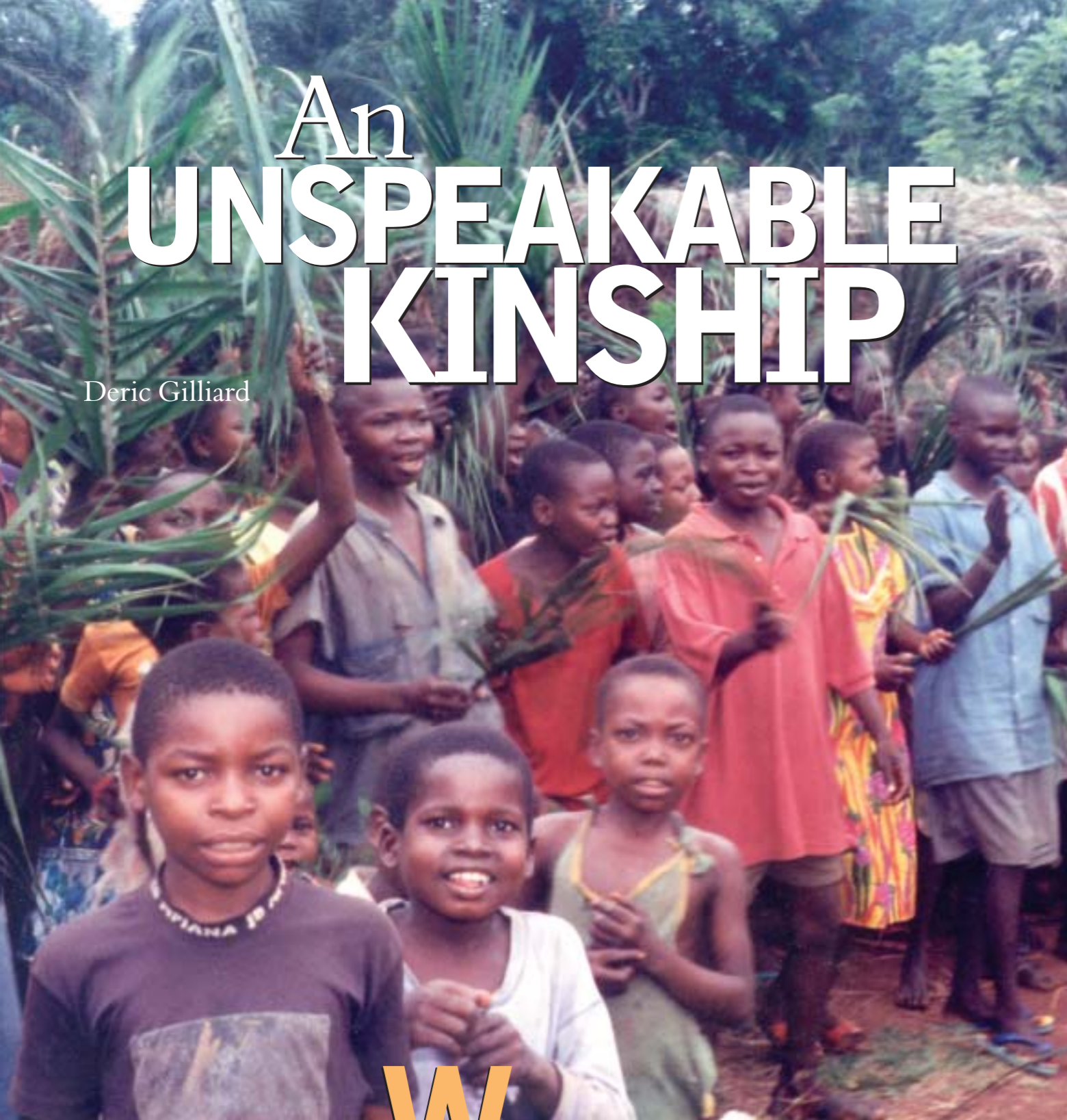


An UNSPEAKABLE KINSHIP

Deric Gilliard



In early March, eight African-American Covenanters traveled to the Congo and found a welcome they never expected.

WE WERE ALL A BIT SURPRISED WHEN WE SAW THE PLANE. One engine. Barely room for six people and the twenty-five pounds of luggage we were limited to. Rose Cornelious, who organized our trip—using all of the wisdom God gave her—conveniently failed to tell us that we would be traveling in what looked like a crop duster and landing on a dirt airstrip.

For most of us, it was a good thing that she kept that minor fact to herself. I am not sure we would have come to Africa if she had not. Now there was no turning back.

My traveling companions were Ed Carey, pastor of Palmetto Covenant Church in Miami, and Mary Ann Owens, president of Covenant Women Ministries for the Southeast Conference. We were part of Team Africa, a group of eight African-American Covenant ministers and leaders on a ten-day mission trip to Africa and the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo.

Our group was finally headed into Congo to visit the Covenant hospital and churches in Karawa. Rose, coordinator of church relations-east for Covenant World Mission, and Sam Bryan, pastor of Christian Community Covenant Church in Jamaica Estates, New York, were going to Imeloko to visit another hospital. Darryl and Beverly Johnson of Walk of Faith Covenant Church in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, where Darryl is the pastor, were meeting with leaders of the Congo Covenant Church (CEUM) in Gemena. On our way to Karawa, we would stop there to drop off Jerome Nelson, director of church and society ministries for the Central Conference, the last member of the team.

We had arrived in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR) the day before, following two days of grueling travel from the U.S. En route, we had a twelve-hour stopover in Paris, where we were hosted by Covenant missionaries Francisco and Stephanie Ramos. The Ramoses took us on an action-packed, four-hour tour of the city that included Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower, and dinner at a cozy little sidewalk café called Le Quasimodo.

Following an eight-hour flight that departed Paris after midnight, we arrived at the Bangui airport, which was protected by a uniformed, armed militia and 16-inch anti-aircraft guns. As I got off the plane, I was almost knocked over by the blistering heat,

which had already reached ninety-eight degrees at 10 a.m.

After what seemed like an eternity getting through the airport, we departed with Covenant missionaries Ken Satterberg, Keith Gustafson, and Bob and Karen Andrews. Bangui has been the headquarters for Covenant missionaries in the area since September

minutes from the heart of downtown, we met with the other missionaries, including Covenanter Florence Gustafson and Thelma Landrud of the Bangui Free Church.

That evening, Ed preached at a worship service that included conferees in town for an international women's conference and Mattie Sharpless, the newly



A view of a typical landing strip in Congo

When we got out of the plane, we saw more than 800 people waving palm leaves and singing, smiling, clapping, and cheering. Stunned—and speechless—we quickly glanced at each other, wondering who the spectacular reception was for.

1991, when they were evacuated from Congo (then Zaire) because of unrest there. Not only did Satterberg and Gustafson speak both French and Lingala (the local trade language), they were also adept at negotiating the perilous local landscape that demanded each gatekeeper be paid a little something in order for travelers to proceed.

Windows down—we never rode in an air-conditioned vehicle during the trip—my head whipped back and forth as I tried to soak in all the sights and sounds along the thoroughfare, which served as a moving marketplace. There were mangos, bananas, Coca Cola, cigarette stands, and dozens of other trinkets and food stuffs that could be had for a song.

Once at the guarded, gated missionary compound, located about eight

appointed U.S. ambassador to the CAR. Ed's inspirational message, from 3 John, followed a spirited praise and worship session led by Darryl, Beverly, and the rest of the team.

We finished the service, mentally and physically exhausted, and then met for our nightly debriefing session. We listened attentively as Rose, always the protective mother hen, parceled out a devotion schedule for the rest of the trip. After much discussion, we drifted back to our quarters to soak in our first night of sleeping in a real bed—instead of on an airplane—in three days.

The next day, after what was any-

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thing but a peaceful night under mosquito nets, we had a fast-paced day, which included an orientation to the rich history of the Covenant in the Congo since 1937.

Some of us also visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Center and the U.S. Embassy, located next door to the center, in the heart of downtown. We strolled through the outdoor market, where anything you could think of, including every manner of fish and wild game, lay on display for both us and the flies that the merchants calmly ignored, but we could not.

The next morning, we arrived at the

Before taking off, Brad prayed not only for a safe flight, but that we might be a blessing to the people of Congo. Airborne for our short flight to Gemena, where we would stop to let Jerome off, I marveled at the vast ruggedness of the land. Snapping pictures with glee, I glanced over at my traveling companions, only to see Mary Ann praying—between periodic ques-

Brad told us that was where we would be landing. Mary Ann grabbed the seat in front of her in a death-grip, while Ed kept his eyes closed and leaned



Team Africa met with the U.S. ambassador to the Central African Republic. Clockwise from left: Beverly Johnson, Sam Bryan, Ed Carey, Jerome Nelson, Mary Ann Owens, Deric Gilliard, Darryl Johnson, Mattie Sharpless, and Rose Cornelious.

At every place ... the story was the same: nothing worked, yet everybody pressed on—standing in the gap, hoping against hope that God would provide relief.

airport and met Brad, an American Christian, who would pilot our single-engine plane. The twenty-five pound limit on luggage meant that all the canned sardines, beef jerky, nuts, fish steaks, and other goodies I had loaded up on at home—bound and determined I wasn't going to get sick from eating Congolese food—had to be left at the compound. The one thing I had to take, even if it meant wearing the same clothes for three days, was my camera and extra film.

tions to the pilot of how much longer—and Ed holding his head and valiantly trying to fight off air sickness.

Landing briefly in Gemena for refueling and to drop off Jerome, we were warmly greeted by about a dozen of our CEUM brothers, who came out to the plane and were excited about shaking our hands and meeting us. Then we were airborne again.

Twenty-five minutes later, Brad pointed to a skinny dirt airstrip in the distance. To Mary Ann's abject horror,

against the side of the plane.

Soon we were on the ground, thanks to another smooth landing by our capable pilot. As we taxied down the dirt runway, a few people started coming out of the bushes and undergrowth on the side of the runway, smiling broadly and waving at us. Then, when we got out of the plane, we saw more than 800 people waving palm leaves and singing, smiling, clapping, and cheering. Stunned—and speechless—we quickly glanced at each other, won-

ED CAREY

For Ed Carey, the rain meant he just started preaching louder. What he didn't know is that it hadn't rained since October.

Carey, pastor of Palmetto Covenant Church in Miami, had been asked to speak at an evening service in Karawa on the day he and several members of Team Africa arrived in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

About halfway through his sermon, it started to thunder and lightning. Carey, who describes himself as an "old-style Baptist preacher," was preaching about how God wanted to bless the people of Congo with physical health as well as spiritual health.

"I kind of got caught up in it," says Carey. "When it started to thunder and lightning, I started raising my voice and shouting. People just started standing up, one person started running and dancing, and I was going on and on."

Then the translator asked Carey to stop for a moment. As Carey paused, and got a drink of water, the translator told him what the rain meant to the local community. "Most of us are gardeners," he explained, "and we have planted our seeds and have been waiting for rain. You are preaching how God wants to bless them, and God is blessing them with the rain."

Later, while visiting a school, Carey had a chance to talk to a group of young men. The young men, aged nineteen to twenty-eight, were volunteering at the school because there was no work for them in the area. They asked Carey if there was anything he could do to help them further their education.

"Their heart's desire was for education," Carey says. "They couldn't go further than high school."

After talking with the young men, someone took a picture of Carey with them. He learned the next day that one of the young men had died.

"He had some kind of medical condition," Carey says. "I don't know the whole story. That really hit me—that night they asked for help and the next day he died." □



Students at a school in Congo

dering who the spectacular reception was for. Michael Jackson? Colin Powell? Perhaps NBA star Dikembe Mutumbo, a native of the Congo.

To our utter amazement, we realized they were clapping, dancing, singing, and cheering for us, who they considered their long lost brothers and sisters, back home after a separation that extended beyond a lifetime.

As we climbed out of the aircraft, the soaring cadence of the uplifting song cascaded over us, enveloping us with love and a strange sense of security. Though numbed by the reception, which included a receiving line a quarter of a mile long, the journalist in me took over as I started clicking my camera shutter while first Ed, then Mary Ann, were greeted by Mbewa Joseph, leader of the area pastors, his fellow ministers, our interpreter, and then the awaiting crowd. Torn between trying to document the moment and greeting and fellowshiping with the people from Karawa, I stumbled through, frantically trying to do both, while doing a good job at neither.

I didn't even care. Because after decades of wondering, questioning, and grasping to understand, I finally was in the heart of Africa, not quite home, yet in the midst of a people with whom I felt a special connection, an unspeakable kinship, even though it gnawed at me that I could neither prove how or when we were ever related.

After walking through a giant lei and shaking the hands of literally hundreds of people en route to a waiting SUV, we were whisked off over a narrow, bumpy, single-lane, winding dirt road on a ten-minute ride to the house we would call home for the next three days. Once we arrived, we sat down for a meal of chicken, a dish that tasted like greens with a grits-like substance, bread, and rice. Before too long, however, our interpreter was ushering us out the door to a church, where we would begin the first of dozens of site visits and ministerial engagements.

Armed with flashlights—there was very limited electricity in the village—

we followed our guide down a winding path to the small, single story mortar church, which was packed with people. The service, punctuated with song and dance by four youth groups, began with a "charge" to Ed, Mary Ann, and me regarding the enormous challenges and opportunities that confronted the region, as well as a fervent plea that we help in whatever way possible. Shortly after the service began, a torrential rainstorm blasted the region—which had not seen moisture in more than seven months. The village leadership was overjoyed, insisting that we had not only brought hope for the future, but much needed rain for the present.

Much of the message was difficult to hear because the loudspeakers, near the altar, were wired to three automobile batteries. The church, like most of the village, had no electricity. Most of the infrastructure of the country has been destroyed during the ongoing civil war that began in the mid-nineties. Nevertheless, they rejoiced greatly and we were humbled to join with them.

Ed, whose position as pastor made him our unofficial leader, preached for twenty-five minutes, again a message of empowerment from 3 John, exhorting the congregation to believe it could break free from the shackles of economic poverty and physical hardships. Near the end of the service, Ed called all of the children to the altar, where he prayed for each of them to grow up to walk in the fullness of what God had in store for them as his children.

Following the service, which was interrupted with fervent applause on several occasions, we followed the pastor and his team of ministers as they slowly negotiated the pitch-black path to a building they used for a conference room. Never before had the Big

"Welcome Home," the signs read. We have been waiting for 700 years."

When Mary Ann Owens and her colleagues got off the plane in Karawa, they were surprised to see a crowd of 800 people waiting for them.

"They were chanting and singing. It was like a big family reunion," says Owens. "Quite a few people did speak English and they welcomed us."

Owens says that before she and the rest of Team Africa arrived, they were told that people in Congo had very little food. So she was overwhelmed by the hospitality they received. "They laid out a banquet for us—we had roasted

peanuts, and pineapple, and papayas," she says. "You would never have known they had very little food."

She was also moved to see the commitment that people of the CEUM have to education, despite their limited resources. The classrooms were packed with children sitting on the floor, despite the heat and lack of fans or air conditioning. Teachers used whatever material they could salvage after the

rebels had come through the area.

"The headmaster told us there was very little absenteeism," Owens says. "Even though they were often hungry when they go there, the kids still came to school." □



A young Congolese boy greets Mary Ann Owens.

Dipper beamed so brilliantly—we were only three degrees from the Equator—it almost seemed as though I could reach up and grab it. Once there, we met nearly a dozen more pastors and ministers, some who had traveled by bicycle and foot for as far away as seventy miles just to meet with us.

Following warm, hearty introductions around the table, the pastors preceded to tell us about their many challenges. Many were unable to adequately feed their families because their congregations have few resources to pay them with, and the pastors have no spare time to earn a living. Another key obstacle is the lack of transportation to

JEROME NELSON

While Jerome Nelson was visiting one of the local churches in Congo, a little boy came up to him and started pulling on his hand. The boy insisted that he come with him.

Nelson, director of church and society ministries for the Central Conference, asked an interpreter what the boy wanted. It seems the boy's father had been telling him that some people had been taken away from the Congo years ago. Someday, the father told his son, they would come home. The boy's father was sick that day, and was not able to meet Nelson and the rest of his group. "He wanted to take me back home to show his father that we had made it," says Nelson.

That kind of welcome was typical of the response Jerome and other members of Team Africa received. "I anticipated the welcome being cordial because we were Christians and we were black. I didn't expect it to be, 'Welcome back home.'"

Soon after arriving, Nelson says that he realized that he was not on just another mission trip. This was something special for him, something life-changing. "I feel like I have a new mission in life," he says. "I can now see that there are some things that I can do here in the U.S. to help the situation in Congo." That mission includes trying to help raise money and awareness about the need to support education and healthcare in Congo.

Nelson had the chance to visit a health clinic in Gemena, along with team members Darryl and Beverly Johnson. "We were in this little bitty room," he says, "and there were rubber gloves hanging up to dry. When you or I go to the doctor's office, the doctor finishes and then throws the gloves away. [In Congo] they were hanging up to dry. If we were able to do anything, let's send a couple of thousand boxes of rubber gloves." □



Patients at the Karawa Hospital, run by the CEUM

move around the rough terrain to pick up parishioners for church, conferences, and meetings. Still another is a lack of medical access that has resulted in nearly all of the children of the region contracting worms by the time they are four years old. The average lifespan of the Congolese, according to a State Department document, is less than fifty years. Several of the ministers, totally grey with lined, leathery skin, appeared to be seventy or older. And though they still ministered daily, they had no provision for retirement. One, the Karawa village "father," was homeless because his house had been destroyed during the war.

Overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge, I leaned back in my chair as they turned to Ed for his advice on

We also left with a new found love and appreciation for our missionaries, who sacrifice in ways most will never understand in order to go into all the world and spread the gospel.

how to improve their plight. We each took turns speaking, trying to offer hope and encouragement, yet being careful not to promise what we had neither the authority nor the resources to provide. Finally, at almost 11 p.m., we prayed and the session was over.

The next day, bright and early, we had breakfast and began a whirlwind tour of the region's hospital—which had no running water, few sheets on the beds, nothing approaching modern equipment, and not even a single computer—schools, water supply, and other critical locales. Still, at every turn, we could see the ingenuity of the people, who made things by hand like wheelchairs, crutches, and other rehabilitative devices that we routinely take for granted. Everywhere we went, people were lined along the way, waiting, expecting, overjoyed to see us.

Each school that we visited was overcrowded, oftentimes with dirt floors, few or no desks, and no textbooks and supplies. The teachers had not been paid in four months. Yet the children were joyous, well behaved, and loving. At every place, from the print shop full



This mother brought her baby to the Karawa Hospital to be treated.

of broken-down equipment, to the bleak, yet packed schoolhouses, the story was the same: nothing worked, yet everybody pressed on—standing in the gap, hoping against hope that God would provide relief.

DARRYL AND BEVERLY JOHNSON

Darryl Johnson of Walk of Faith Covenant Church in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, says he has always dreamed of going to Africa. Both he and his wife, Beverly, believed they would feel a unique connection with those they met in Congo. They just didn't know how special the connection would be.

"All of the kids knew that Americans were coming . . . but the kids were amazed at us because they did not know that black Americans were in Africa," he says. "What really broke me down was when they read welcome messages to us. All of them said that we had come on a 700-year journey back home. It changed my whole perspective because I felt a responsibility to my people."

Johnson says that when he walked through the streets of Bangui in the Central African Republic, it reminded him of Mound Bayou. "I felt like I was home," he

Unaccustomed to such poverty, the distended bellies, the jaundiced eyes, the bare feet of many of the children, the unwashed, raggedly clothing, we wanted relief. Yet, there was none. Each time we thought we had seen all there was to see, we climbed back into the truck, and bounced on down the road, deeper into the rural area, past more huts and waving villagers, to another scene that begged for answers that we could not give.

Finally, it was time to go back to Bangui. This time the airport was deserted when we landed. After meeting up with the rest of the team, we were eager to compare stories. On our last day in Africa, we fellowshipped over dinner with all the missionaries. We then split up and went to the homes of three local Congolese pastors, who were eager to hear about our experiences. It was a wonderful chance to share our hearts and to tell them how blessed we were by the experience. We also left with a newfound love and appreciation for our missionaries, who sacrifice in ways most will never understand in order to go into all the world and spread the gospel.

When it was finally time to say good-

bye, there were tears of joy and sadness, yet an excitement about returning to the United States. Blessed beyond measure, we immediately began to construct a plan to impact the Congo, believing that "to whom much is given, much is required."

We are not yet sure how, but we are committed to making a difference, whether it's by sharing what we saw and experienced in churches, or seeking support from corporations and foundations, or soliciting personnel and expertise to commit some time to the region to share with our brothers and sisters information and technology that will improve their lives. We aren't sure how, but through God's grace, we will make a difference. □

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SAM BRYAN AND ROSE CORNELIOUS

As part of their time in Congo, Rose Cornelious and Sam Bryan traveled to Imeloko and examined hospitals there. Cornelious stated that key diagnostic equipment was broken and medicines to cure simple diseases were unavailable. The tour guide of the local hospital said that the local hospital staff hadn't been paid in eight months. Schools and churches were being destroyed by termite damage and education was being compromised. Some families had to share clothing because of the lack of clothes there.

"We were prepared for some of what we saw, but you could never prepare yourself for everything," says Cornelious, coordinator of church relations-east for the Department of World Mission. "It was absolutely the most deplorable, inhumane survival situation I had ever seen. It makes me want to be a drum major for change to infuse some help into the Congo."

Despite the shortage of medical supplies and other necessities, the Congolese managed to stay hopeful. Bryan, pastor of Christian Community Covenant Church in Jamaica Estates, New York, was surprised at the enormity of the work being done in the CEUM, as well as the passion of the people for Jesus.

"To see a mission work of that magnitude in that area of the country was significant," he says. "I think overall it was certainly an experience of a lifetime. It really impacted us in a major way and I came back fired up, not just for missions, but for God's work at home as well. God allowed me to go over there to challenge me and I want to do the same thing for people in my congregation." □

Bryan continued, "I was impressed by the fact that as bad as things are, the people still have a heart to worship and to praise God. When they get together, it's nothing like we experience. It's an outpouring of praise. These people have nothing and yet they have such a passion. The church is a major part of what's happening in the world and I take off my hat to the work of Covenant missions and CEUM. They have built a tremendous work. If it wasn't for the church and what God is doing I don't know what kind of shape these people would be in. They would have no hope."

Cornelious hopes to prepare a plan of action through the African-American Ministers' Association to help address the needs of the Congo, which has more than 156,000 attending Covenant churches there. "I believe the Covenant started a good work in the Congo and we want to finish it," she says. "We are the body of Jesus and we should hurt when they hurt. And they're really hurting. We know this is not the end for us. We have a mandate to bring change." □



School children line up to meet Team Africa members

How to Help

Covenant World Relief (CWR) is actively working in Congo to assist people there, providing support for health care and assisting victims of the volcano eruption in Goma earlier this year.

"Covenant World Relief was formed to reach out to the poorest of the poor and those facing hardship and suffering from manmade and natural disasters," says Jim Sundholm, director of CWR. "Certainly you have had that level of tragedy and suffering in Congo."

Sundholm says that the Congo is currently receiving the largest amount of funds that CWR is distributing. That includes funds for the hospitals run by the CEUM, as well as sixty-three medical clinics. There are additional plans to provide support for education as well.

To assist the people of Congo through CWR, donations can be sent to: Covenant World Relief, 5101 N. Francisco, Chicago, IL 60625 (designate for Congo)