

School expands knowledge, Partnership

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The Rev. Laura Easto, Baltimore-North District Superintendent, center, dances with Zimbabwe Episcopal Area district superintendents at the closing celebration of the pastors school and Shalom training held at Africa University in Old Mutare, June 6-9.

"You've equipped me as a pastor."

Fungai Bisenti, 31, was brimming with grateful enthusiasm on the last evening of the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area Pastors School and Communities of Shalom training, June 9, held at Africa University in Old Mutare.

Now in his third year at the Murombedzi Mission near Harare, this local pastor has had little formal training to help him deal with the challenges he faces in his first appointment. That lack of training is all too common in Zimbabwe, especially among local pastors, who make up about 60 percent of the pastors there.

"But God has enabled us," Bisenti said. He is leading his congregation to start ministries for children orphaned by poverty, AIDS and other diseases. "I've learned a lot here," he added. "And I say, 'God, help me to apply these things so that our church might grow.'"

Bisenti began his interview by thanking a list of people, starting with the two men chiefly responsible for the long-awaited pastors school and Shalom training, bishops Eben K. Nhwatiwa of the Zimbabwe Area and John R. Schol of the Washington Area. He then thanked the Zimbabwean district superintendents who set the curriculum and the instructors from both areas, including a team of 15 clergy and laity from the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

"The lessons in spiritual development and renewal, biblical studies, worship, church administration and preaching were powerful," Bisenti said. "And the asset-based planning (for strategic community development) helped me to see the assets around me in Murombedzi. When I go back, I'm going to visit people and share the vision that we're having as a church."

Helping Zimbabwean United Methodist pastors to perceive and pursue possibilities for vital ministry in their churches and communities was one goal of the four-day pastors school and Communities of Shalom training. Another was to fortify the growing relationship between the Zimbabwe East and West conferences and the Baltimore-Washington Conference through mutual teaching, learning, worship and fellowship.

That relationship is in fact a partnership, thanks to the joint ministry covenant first signed by now-retired bishops Christopher Jokomo and Felton Edwin May in 1997, and now renewed for at least another four years by the current bishops.

Just as they had on the last evening of the Baltimore-Washington Conference annual session in Baltimore, May 28, bishops Nhiwatiwa and Schol jointly signed the new covenant again on the last day of the pastors school in Old Mutare. On both occasions, the two bishops raised their clasped hands triumphantly as observers erupted in celebration and joyful singing.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to covenant together in partnership," said Bishop Schol. "We are one body, one spirit. As we sign this covenant, we affirm that we are all one in God's eyes."

Besides ongoing support for pastors schools, the covenant agreement also continues supportive relationships between districts to aid mission work in Zimbabwe and expands efforts to respond to the spread of HIV/AIDS, the needs of orphans and possibilities for viable community development.

Added facets will include partnering in communications and in the development of administrative facilities in the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area, funding for a project coordinator in Zimbabwe to help implement the agreement, support for theological education of Zimbabwean clergy and enabling some of them to itinerate in the Washington Episcopal Area to help interpret the covenant to churches here.

The covenant agreement also expresses the desire of the Baltimore-Washington Conference to learn from the vibrant congregational growth, discipleship, worship and evangelism happening among Zimbabwean churches. Team members experienced some of that vibrancy when they visited and preached in more than a dozen Zimbabwe churches on two Sundays.

" This covenant is an example of what should be done between conferences in the U.S. and Africa," Bishop Nhiwatiwa said in an interview. "It is a broad covenant, covering a lot of important areas, and everything in there is of God."

Describing the pastors school as "very valuable in teaching us and keeping us connected," he also thanked the Baltimore-Washington Conference for its financial assistance. "It would have been very difficult to do this on our own."

About 260 clergy from Zimbabwe, Botswana and Malawi attended the pastors school and the simultaneous Communities of Shalom training, which included classes in faith-based community organizing, fund raising and economic development.

An intense two-hour plenary session on HIV/AIDS followed the covenant-signing on the final day. Speakers, including both bishops, talked candidly about the disease, the fear of many churches and pastors to address it, the need to encourage people to get tested, and the need for more pastoral care and counseling to help victims and their families.

"This pastors school was such a beautiful thing of unity, like we were all family," said the

Rev. Annie Grace Chingonzo, superintendent of the Harare East District.

"And we learned so much about worship, biblical studies, preaching ... and about Shalom ministries that are so needed in our areas. Those classes taught us that it begins with building relationships and strategic planning. My prayer is that we will continue this sister relationship in the future."