

By Dean Snyder*

SAKUBVA TOWNSHIP, Zimbabwe (UMNS) -- Hilltop United Methodist Church in Sakubva Township overlooks one of the poorest, most densely populated and HIV/AIDS-affected communities in the country.

United Methodist leaders and pastors from throughout Zimbabwe gathered at Hilltop Church Jan. 19-21 for the first Shalom Zone training ever held outside the United States. The 36 Zimbabwean participants included United Methodist Bishop Christopher Jokomo, district superintendents, conference staff, pastors and lay leaders as well as faculty and students from Africa University.

By the conclusion of the training, the section of Sakubva Township known as Old Location, visible from Hilltop Church, had been declared a Shalom Zone - the first Shalom Zone outside the United States.

Other possible Shalom Zones being considered in Zimbabwe are Old Mutare Mission and Orphanage and the United Methodist Conference Center in Harare.

The training, facilitated by the Rev. Joseph Daniels, pastor of Emory United Methodist Church in Washington, included presentations by a team of district superintendents, conference staff, pastors and laity from the Baltimore-Washington Conference under the leadership of Council Director Marcus Matthews.

Begun by the United Methodist Church in 1992, the Shalom movement has established more than 200 Shalom Zones throughout the United States where United Methodists work with other churches and community groups to build spiritual renewal, economic development, strengthened ethnic, class and cultural relations, and improved health and healing in urban and rural communities.

In 1993, Jokomo visited the first U.S. Shalom Zone in the section of Los Angeles devastated by rioting following the 1992 Rodney King verdict. "The conditions that favor that kind of uprising are present right here in Zimbabwe," the bishop told the Shalom training team from the Baltimore-Washington Conference. "I asked myself whether it is possible for the church in Zimbabwe to learn from your experience."

In 1996, Jokomo invited Bishop Felton E. May of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, who chaired the National Shalom Committee, to visit Zimbabwe. A partnership agreement between the councils of ministries of the conferences was passed by both groups in 1997. The agreement included a provision that the Baltimore-Washington Conference, which has established more than 20

Shalom Zones throughout its own area, lead Shalom training in Zimbabwe. Baltimore-Washington Conference Council Director Matthews and his counterpart in Zimbabwe, the Rev. Gladman Kaupfumvuuti, spent more than a year organizing the training.

Noting that the Shalom model would need to be adapted to fit "our own Zimbabwean context," Jokomo said the training will initiate a new focus on ministry with the poor and disadvantaged by the United Methodist churches of Zimbabwe.

"We are committed to making a difference in communities where the United Methodist Church is present," he said. "I hope we can say one day to Sakubva, 'Today your poverty is gone.'"

Old Location, the site of Zimbabwe's first Shalom Zone, is a community of 30,000 people in Sakubva Township, a suburb of Mutare.

Old Mutare Mission, the birthplace of United Methodism in Zimbabwe, and Africa University are also in Mutare, a city in east Zimbabwe near the Mozambique border.

According to the Rev. John Rugayo, associate pastor of St. Peter's Inner-City United Methodist Church of Mutare, the city was established as a white European settlement in 1897. Because European settlers were uncomfortable with the number of Africans moving into Mutare, land was cleared outside the city in 1925, and three-room houses built in what is now Old Location.

"Old Location really means this is the first African urban suburb in Mutare," Rugayo said. "Location means people were located here."

As Africans were brought to Mutare to work on farms and in factories, Old Location became more and more crowded. One-room shacks, often housing entire families, were built in the front and back yards of the original homes.

During the Zimbabwean War of Liberation from 1965 to 1980, soldiers' wives and widows fled fighting in the rural areas and sought safety in Old Location, sleeping on floors of crowded shacks, Rugayo said. The population continues to be dominated by women and children as rural people move into the area seeking employment.

Because of the lack of jobs and affordable education, people "have to live by hook or by crook," Rugayo said. Old Location is now characterized by poverty, prostitution and AIDS. "Most of Mutare's crime comes from there --- not that they are by any means born criminal but because simple living requires that that they must have food to eat," he said.

The Shalom Zone plan for Old Location, developed by pastors and lay leaders from Mutare, identified assets within the community to build on, such as skilled crafts people and community organizations. The Shalom team, focusing on the goal of economic development, prepared a mission statement saying its purpose is "to provide economic, education and technical training through bringing together school leavers (drop-outs) and adults to encourage and empower them with skills to start projects that will create employment." The group plans to open "skill training centers" using volunteer carpenters and teachers.

Daniels, Shalom coordinator for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, was impressed by the Zimbabweans' grasp of such Shalom principles as asset-based organizing and strategic planning. "When I lead Shalom training in the United States, if we have eight churches participating, maybe three will really 'get it,'" he said. "Even though we had to condense the training from five days to three, they 'got it' in a day and a half. They understood Shalom."

The Rev. John F. Munjoma, pastor of Hilltop Church, said the concept of Shalom is not foreign to Zimbabweans. "It sounds very much like Shona," he said. The tribal background and native language of many United Methodists in Zimbabwe is Shona, which is also a wisdom tradition. Munjoma quoted a traditional Shona proverb: "If you are at peace, I also am at peace, but if you are troubled, I also am troubled."

Shalom means United Methodists cannot live in isolation from those from around them who are suffering, said the Rev. Maria Masamba, superintendent of the Murewea District. "Our peace and well-being is found when others have peace and well-being as well."

Jokomo brought Shalom training to Zimbabwe because of his concern that the church reach out to the poor.

"If the church does not go to poor communities, we are headed for real disaster," he said. "Corporations can't do it - they do what they do for money. The church does it for people and for Jesus Christ. In Africa, the church will be the best resource to help poor communities."

"If Africa is to survive, the denomination must work together to strengthen the church in Africa," he said.

Lynda Byrd, director of Communities of Shalom ministries for the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, met with Daniels to prepare for the training in Zimbabwe. "She was very supportive," Daniels said. "It is her hope to expand Shalom ministry not only nationally but around the globe."

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