

Bishop Miller Travels to South Africa, Learns of Life and Ministry in Companion Synod

by Jeffrey L. Drake, Associate to the Bishop for Public Relations

Bishop Wayne N. Miller, the Rev. Kathryn North, pastor at Good Shepherd in Oak Park, Ill., and Mr. Jeff Drake, Associate to the Bishop, travelled to the synod's companion synod, the Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, from September 3 to 15, 2008. This was Miller's first trip to the Central Diocese, and the second for North who will be the convener of the synod's new advisory group for the companion synod relationship, and the second for Drake, who coordinates the companion synod program in the synod office. Miller was also in South Africa to take part in a consultation in Cape Town (September 10-14, 2008) hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), and attended by partners and companion churches and mission agencies from the ELCA, Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Germany), Church of Sweden, Berlin Mission, Church of Norway, and Church of Finland.

The purpose of the trip was to introduce Bishop Miller to the Rt. Rev. N.P. Phaswana, Bishop of the Central Diocese, and other diocesan leaders. In addition, the group toured the four circuits of the diocese (Eastern, Western, Pretoria, and Soweto) and gathered more information about projects supported by the synod, including the Diakonia AIDS Ministry (DAM), and Project Education that assists students at Mapetla High School.

The Visit

After arriving in South Africa, Miller, North, and Drake met with the Diocesan Council who introduced themselves, and thanked the synod for its ongoing partnership. The group took part in the diocese's synod meeting, and visited several congregations in the Soweto Circuit. At West Meadowlands, youth members were deciding who would read Sunday's lesson and where they would gather after worship to watch a movie. Bethsaida, a congregation, was filled with choir members washing windows, doors and pews for Sunday worship, as well as singing and preparing a potluck meal. On Sunday, Bishop Miller delivered the sermon at a combined service in Potchefstroom in the Western Circuit, followed by attendance at a diocesan music competition.

Monday was spent visiting congregations in the Western Circuit, near Boksburg and Reichers Park, and a tour of a United Nations camp set up for immigrants to South Africa who had been the focus of recent xenophobic attacks and violence. The Camp Director worked closely with local social workers, and clinics, as well as pastors, including the Rev. Christopher Behrens, a Dean in the Central Diocese, who believes that the church "can be an agent of change by creating bridges between people." This was followed by a tour of St. Francis House of Mercy, an HIV/AIDS Hospice, and a dinner with pastors from the Western Circuit.

Tuesday, the group visited Pretoria, including Freedom Park, several congregations, and participation in a renewal of wedding vows service, followed by dinner with Eastern Circuit pastors and leaders. Wednesday through Sunday, Bishop Miller participated in the Bishop's Consultation in Cape Town, and preached at a congregation on Sunday. North and Drake took part in a congregational visit to Pretoria with a Women's Group, visited the Diakonia AIDS Clinic, including several congregational service points, and Mapetla High School. In addition, they took part in a Young Adult Leadership Training Event held at the diocesan center, worshipped at a congregation on Sunday, participated in a Women's League meeting, and were

able to take part in several pastoral care visits. On Monday, Miller, Drake, and North met with members of the Diocesan Council who outlined their strategic priorities. These priorities are:

- Human Resource – Skill Development and Training
- Social Ministry Advocacy
- DAM (Diakonia AIDS Ministry)
- Development of Christian Education Curriculum for Students and Adults
- Theological training with an emphasis on relevancy and evangelism
- Liturgical and worship renewal with an emphasis on Africanizing rhythms and creating ritual for daily life
- Communication Ministry Strategy within a context of unreliable community resources, and
- Financial and Administrative Training for pastors and leaders

Diakonia AIDS Ministry

Located in Soweto, South Africa, on the grounds of the diocesan office, Diakonia AIDS Ministry (formally dedicated in 2004) serves about 80 people a week at the clinic itself. In addition, the clinic directs the activities of a staff of 26 (six people working in the office, ten Home Based Care Givers, and four coordinators and four facilitators in all four circuits of the diocese) who provide services throughout the Central Diocese. Congregations throughout the diocese are used as meeting places, education centers, and food distribution points. DAM provides services to all those in need – 90% of the people served by the ministry are not even Lutheran. Yearly support from the synod provides grants to help staff and operate the ministry.

Its vision is “to be a leading faith-based organization in people-centered health and development services.” It has orphan care programs in all circuits of the diocese, three outreach support groups, education and training, sewing, carpentry, bead making, counseling services, and administration. It strives to be a resources consultant linking clients to resources, to assist clients to develop self-knowledge, and providing clients with skills. As Rahab Ramodibe, the lead social worker stated, “The goal is to link people with resources so that they feel confident enough to exit the program with both new skills and better self-esteem.”

The ministry has served 91 clients in home based health care since the beginning of 2008. This ministry provides palliative care to sick and bed-ridden people who are in the last stage of HIV infection, and who are also suffering from other chronic diseases such as tuberculosis, cancer, ulcer wounds, and diabetes.

DAM provides orphan care services for 30 children in each of the four circuits (for a current total of 120 orphans served). DAM interviews prospective foster parents, provides regular outings for the children, monitors academic progress, and provides before and after-school care – as well as daycare. The ministry of caring for AIDS orphans is expected to increase as 5.5 million South African’s are HIV positive (out of a population of 48.6 million), more than any other country in the world.¹

In addition, DAM holds workshops on proper nutrition, and provides food parcels. Between November 9, 2007, and April 10, 2008, DAM held 135 workshops attended by 6,118 people.

¹ Source: BBC News - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7637207.stm>

Importantly, DAM is intimately connected with other service providers so that it can refer people suffering from a wide-range of related issues, such as domestic abuse, and alcoholism, to proper treatment centers.

DAM's executive director, the Rev. SS Mughivi, expressed profound gratitude for the continuing support of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, noting that such support saves lives, prevents new HIV/AIDS infections, and provides dignity and care for those who die from the disease.

Project Education

Initiated by John and Ruth Bradburn, members at Hosanna! Lutheran Church in St. Charles, Ill., Project Education is a mentoring program for volunteer educators to mentor South African teachers and students on an interim basis. In addition, the project provides funds for bursaries (scholarships) for students, purchasing much-needed science equipment, and books. At least four scholarship recipients have graduated from college, and are working full-time. The matriculation rate has increased from 30% to 90%.

In the future, the school hopes to provide more training in math and science, and fully equipped vocational training courses.

How Can I Help?

Members of the synod are already supporting this ministry. When you share mission support with your local congregation, you are sharing God's love with those who live across the street, and around the world. If you are interested in providing additional support to the HIV/AIDS Ministry in Soweto, South Africa, please contact Mr. Steve Homberg at the synod office at shomberg@mcselca.org or 773-248-0021.

More information about the synod's companion synod relationship is available online at <http://www.mcselca.org/companion/index.html>.

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