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Minnesota Churches Rally Behind Anuak Victims in Ethiopia -- and Here

By Doug McGill
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ROCHESTER, MN -- The ethnic cleansing of the Anuak tribe by the Ethiopian army has taken a long time to grab the world's attention.

Not so the churches of Minnesota, however.

In the months following the massacre of 424 Anuak in remote western Ethiopia on December 13, 2003, more than a dozen churches opened their doors to panicked and grieving Anuak immigrants who live in Minnesota.

Some 1,500 Anuak refugees live in the state, having arrived here as refugees in the mid-1990s after fleeing targeted violence against their minority tribe in Ethiopia, by the Ethiopian military and by other ethnic groups.

Because most Anuak are Christian, as the result of more than a century of missionary work among black Africans in Ethiopia, many Anuak in Minnesota joined Christian churches when they first arrived in the state.

Spiritual Care

That membership became a lifeline for many Minnesota Anuak in 2004.

That's because every Anuak in Minnesota has relatives or close friends who died or became refugees in the past year. But because they can't return to Ethiopia for either financial or political reasons, they face a serious psychological burden dealing with their losses as such a distance.

"When people hear that their relatives have died but they can't go back, that's psychologically so hard," said Pastor LeRoy Christoffels, pastor of the Christian Reformed Church in Worthington, MN. "That grief is a serious thing and we try to help them with that by offering spiritual care."

About 30 Anuak belong to the church, Christoffels said. Besides grief counseling, the church has also raised and sent money to help some 10,000 Anuak refugees still living in a camp in south Sudan.

Food and Supplies

The Calvary Baptist Church in Roseville has been the most active, raising more

than \$30,000 to send a human rights team to Ethiopia to interview witnesses and document the massacre in January, 2003.

Other church leaders have traveled as well to the United Nations in New York and Geneva; to the European Union headquarters in Brussels; and to Washington to lobby U.S. political leaders to put pressure on Ethiopia to stop the targeted killing of Anuak.

The Calvary Church also sent food and relief supplies to Anuak refugees and survivors in Ethiopia, and worked with the human rights groups Genocide Watch and the World Organization Against Torture to write reports.

Paul Lindberg, a missionary who works with the Calvary Baptist Church and the Eagle Brook Baptist Church in White Bear Lake, has made several trips to Ethiopia, most recently last month where he organized reconciliation meetings between Anuak and ethnic Ethiopians living in Gambella.

"We Loved Them"

The Christ Lutheran Church in Eagan has raised \$24,000 to drill up to ten well holes at the refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan, according to Omot Ochan, an Anuak leader and member of the church.

At the Austin Vineyard evangelical church in Austin, pastors Richard and JoAnn Chinander sponsored two Anuak Days last year. More than 250 Anuak came to the first one, last April 4, while still in shock.

"Our Anuak families came to us crying and saying 'Our families have been killed and we don't know what to do,'" Mr. Chinander said. "We told them we are a small church, and that we were in way over our head, but we loved them and we wanted to help them, and that we would."

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