

Campaign brings renewed hope to war-torn Africa

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Cindy Hill, center, bags some of the produce she and others grew in their gardens and sold at Trinity Episcopal Church in Mount Pocono. Proceeds benefit hungry folk in the southern Sudan region of Kajo Keji. Parishioners purchasing the produce are, from left, June Eisenecker of Stockholm, N.J., Jean Maxwell of Tobyhanna, Cindy Hill, Mary Banzhof of Swiftwater and Mary Karlson of Stroudsburg.
[Maria Horn Photo]

Mount Pocono — Area residents can help people of war-ravaged Africa by buying home-grown vegetables at Trinity Episcopal Church in Mount Pocono.

Since July, Cindy Hill and Alvin Ziegler have been selling surplus vegetables from their garden and donating the money to help rebuild the county of Kajo Keji in South Sudan.

"I've never been to Africa," said Hill. "Our bishop, Paul Marshall, visited Kajo Keji and I saw a slide show of his trip. It really underlined the hardships that people there have endured. My garden went out of control this summer so I decided to sell the surplus for Kajo Keji."

Since July, Hill and Ziegler have given the Trinity Church secretary nearly \$600.

Trinity Church is part of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem which comprises 14 counties in eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania, including Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Lebanon, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties.

The diocese is approximately the same land mass as Kajo Keji county and considers Kajo Keji its sister Anglican parish.

Kajo Keji has a population estimated at 270,000. Nearly 220,000 of the people are Episcopalians, according to Charlie Barebo of the Bethlehem Diocese.

On Sept. 23, the diocese will launch a five-year fundraising effort called the New Hope Campaign to raise \$2.7 million to help rebuild Kajo Keji, said Barebo, who is director of the campaign.

The people of South Sudan have endured a civil war with northern Sudan since 1983, which in many ways was an extension of the first civil war of 1956 -72. A comprehensive peace agreement was signed on Jan. 9, 2005, giving South Sudan the status of a semi-autonomous region.

Sudan is the largest country in Africa — about one-fourth the size of the United States — making South Sudan larger than Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda combined. It is far removed from Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and has been spared some of the atrocities inflicted on people in the north.

The major conflict between northern and southern Sudan stems from ethnic and religious differences. The north is populated by Arab Muslims, the south by Africans of diverse religions, including Christianity. There has been fighting over Sudan's oil reserves. A foreign consortium comprised of China, Malaysia and India controls drilling operations.

Barebo described conditions in Kajo Keji after 20 years of civil war:

"Roads were washed away during the rainy seasons and never rebuilt. There is no road between Kajo Keji and the capital of South Sudan in Juba. The only road goes south to Uganda. There is no electricity. There is no currency. Homes have been destroyed. Rivers and farm fields are mined with plastic mines that metal detectors cannot find. Much of the male population was killed in the war. There are very few wells for drinking water."

Ominously, on a continent that is known for its spectacular wildlife, there are no animals in Kajo Keji.

"I saw a few birds, oxen, goats, chickens and lizards," said Barebo. "I couldn't believe I was in the heart of Africa."

East of Kajo Keji, beyond the Nile River, game reserves and national parks have survived the civil war with the wildlife relatively intact.

The diocese has been wiring money for famine relief to a bank in neighboring Uganda, in a border town called Moyo, where the Kajo Keji diocese has a bank account.

"Moyo is to Kajo Keji what St. Louis, Missouri, was to the pioneers of the American West," said Barebo. Church leaders exchange dollars for Ugandan shillings and use that currency to buy goods.

Kajo Keji was once the bread basket of Sudan. The topography is similar to the U.S. Midwest, with rolling plains of grass called a "veldt."

Plans for rebuilding Kajo Keji include construction of a college with a seminary, a business school, seven primary schools and one secondary school. They also plan to establish a "micro-finance" program to spur small-business investment.

Hill and Ziegler plan to sell their vegetables until the end of the growing season in September. "We still have tomatoes, peppers and corn," said Hill. "But we didn't plant pumpkins."

Trinity Church is located off Route 611 on Trinity Hill Road, across from the riding stable south of Mount Pocono, call (570) 839-9376. Donations can be made directly to "New Hope Campaign" and sent to the Diocese of Bethlehem, 333 Wyandotte St, Bethlehem, PA 18015.