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Relief agencies set up compounds in Ch'Ab in northern Afghanistan and targeted 60 surrounding villages to receive assistance. The villages were ranked as poor, very poor and most needy.

NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN REMAINS IN NEED, PASTOR SAYS

By United Methodist News Service

RESIDENTS OF NORTHERN Afghanistan are in such need that they are selling the roof beams of their homes to raise money for food, according to a United Methodist pastor involved in relief work there.

The Rev. Ray Buchanan, founder and executive director of Stop Hunger Now, noted that the wood is valuable because of its scarcity in the drought-stricken region. "Everyday, we watched people using donkeys to drag two or three poles into the marketplace," he said, after returning from a Feb. 12-18 trip to Afghanistan.

Buchanan collected more than \$3 million worth of aid for Afghanistan – including food, medicine, blankets, and clothing – between his first trip there in October and the end of 2001, along with another \$4 million worth of aid in January and February.

In December, the Holston Conference contributed to Stop Hunger Now's efforts by collecting 100,000 pairs of shoes for refugees in a neighboring country, Tajikistan. The shoes were being stored in a warehouse for distribution during March and April, Buchanan said.

Buchanan's organization, based in Raleigh, N.C., is working with Food for the Hungry International, World Concern, Northwest Medical Teams and the Central Asia Development Agency on the relief project. He was accompanied on his most recent travels by Mike Ward, a Stop Hunger Now board member and superintendent of the department of public instruction for North Carolina. Ward is married to the Rev. Hope Ward, who is on staff with the United Methodist North Carolina Annual Conference.

Stop Hunger Now and its partners originally set up shop in Dashti-qala with the thought of working with internally displaced people in the area.

But when the fighting stopped in November, those people left for home, Buchanan explained, along with many of the aid organizations assisting them.

"What was left were all these villages that were in just as bad shape," he said. "Our group decided to stay."

The agencies set up compounds in Ch'Ab and Rustaq and targeted 60 surrounding villages to receive assistance. "The partners have done such an unbelievably efficient job in making sure the people in the greatest need are getting the aid," Buchanan added.

That task was accomplished by surveying every family in every village and having the religious leader, educational leader and political leader of each village agree together on the families most in need. The villages themselves were ranked as poor, very poor and most needy. In poor villages, 40 percent are eligible for aid; in very poor, 60 percent; and in most needy villages, 80 to 100 percent.

Those eligible for assistance receive a printed ration card with eight punch-outs for food and eight for commodities such as blankets and clothing. When the actual distribution takes place, according to Buchanan, at least one of the three village leaders verifies that a family member is using the card and receiving the goods.

The feeding program will continue until at least July, but there is some optimism about being able to harvest food. Although the area was "dry as a dust bowl" when Buchanan visited in October, the hills were turning green and winter wheat was growing in some places because of the snowfall. To get a harvest, however, "everybody says they need rain all through March and April," he said.

The February trip also focused on education. Buchanan and Ward visited with teachers and educational leaders in eight villages. Ward spoke by satellite telephone from Afghanistan with students from 15 different North Carolina schools. Buchanan expects the state's schools and United Methodist churches to collect school kits for distribution in Afghanistan. The churches already had conducted a blanket drive.

More information on Stop Hunger Now's campaign for Afghan relief is available by calling toll free (888) 501-8440. ■

Annette Bender contributed to this report.

news briefs:

U.S. annual conference sessions begin in May

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) – The United Methodist Church's 65 regional gatherings in the United States will begin May 8-11 when the Troy Annual Conference convenes in Burlington, Vt. The sessions will end with the California-Pacific Conference in Redlands, meeting June 18-23, and the Kentucky Conference in Lexington, June 19-23. Annual conference members, including representatives from every local church, will approve budgets, receive reports from conference boards and agencies, adopt programs of mission and ministry, and address social concerns. Church appointments of clergy members also will be announced, and new deacons and elders will be ordained. The Holston Annual Conference will meet June 9-12 in Lake Junaluska, N.C.

■ Purpose, passion drive church growth, pastor says

ORLANDO, Fla. (UMNS) – Purpose and passion among members form the foundation of church growth, according to the Rev. Adam Hamilton, who leads one of the fastest-growing congregations in the United Methodist Church. "If your church is going to be vital, you have to be clear about why it exists," said Hamilton, senior pastor of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, Mo. "... If people can't talk about the purpose with a certain amount of passion, the church will never grow." Hamilton spoke at a Feb. 8 seminar in Orlando. An average total of 8,000 people attend worship services at his 11-year-old church. ■

Seniors invited to Gatlinburg,

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More About Computers." This year's focus is "Rejoicing, Reflecting, and Renewing."

Other highlights will include worship led by the Rev. Charles Maynard, associate pastor of the Sevierville Circuit and former director of the Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Keynote speaker will be Holston's own Rev. Eddie Fox, world director of evangelism for the World Methodist Council.

The Rev. Richard Gentzler, director of the Center on Aging and Older Adult Ministries for the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship, will lead a workshop on "Myths and Realities of Aging." The topic is relevant for many older adults because "they don't want to admit they're senior citizens," said Harville, a Jubilation organizer for the conference. "Older people need to come to the understanding that they have arrived at this age, but there are still many opportunities for involvement in the church," he said.

Through a mission statement that determines to "nurture spiritual growth, provide educational opportunities, promote involvement in missions and enhance Christian fellowship," Jubilation organizers hope to provide an annual event that will become as important to Holston's senior citizens as Resurrection is to Holston youth each January, Harville said.

Jubilation will be held May 5-7 at Park Vista Hotel in Gatlinburg. Costs, including meals and workshop materials, range from \$171 per person (four persons per room) to \$273 per person (1 per person). A commuter fee is available for \$100. Registration is due by April 1. Brochures and registration forms are available through pastors or the district office. Or, contact the conference office at (865) 690-4080 or Harville at cecjanhar@msn.com. ■