

Nation & World



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Shalom Zone Builds Community In Zimbabwe

By Dean Synder & Jane Malone

MUTARE, Zimbabwe (UMNS) – A United Methodist church is taking a stand against Zimbabwe's economic hard times through a Shalom Zone program that gives people the means to support their families.

Hilltop United Methodist Church, in Sakubva, hosted the first Shalom Zone training outside the United States four years ago. Today, the Shalom Zone principles have flowered into Ishe Anesu, a program empowering women and men to become self-sufficient and their children to succeed academically.

The Ishe Anesu Shalom Zone, born in a room about 12 feet square, includes a restaurant, a bakery, soap manufacturing, knitting and tailoring operations, vegetable gardens and a classroom that provides after-school care and academic enrichment for 58 children.

A brick building under construction will soon house classrooms, a dining hall and administrative offices for Ishe Anesu. Consistent with the empowerment philosophy of the Shalom Zone program, the company overseeing the construction is one created by Hilltop United Methodist Church to employ and train workers from the high-density, high-poverty community neighboring the church.

The Rev. Gift K. Machinga, superintendent of the Mutare District of the Zimbabwe East Annual (regional) Conference, is proud of the way the Shalom Zone concept has taken hold at Ishe Anesu, a word that means "God is with us" in the native Shona language.

But Machinga isn't complacent. He is determined to begin new Shalom Zones in two other communities on his district.

"We don't want Ishe Anesu to be just at Hilltop," he says, as he shows around visitors from the United States. "We want it to spread."

The Shalom Zone movement began in the United States in 1992 in response to outbursts of violence in Los Angeles following the police beating of Rodney



▲ New Construction: *Following the principles of Shalom Zone training, Hilltop United Methodist Church in Sakubva, Zimbabwe, created its own construction company to build new facilities for Ishe Anesu. Construction costs for the new building to house classrooms, training programs and indigenous businesses are being underwritten by the Holston Annual Conference. UMNS Photo by Jane Malone*

King. Church leaders were trained to develop a plan for working with other community institutions and leaders to holistically address the needs of a target area within a distressed urban or rural community.

General Conference, the United Methodist Church's highest legislative body, approved the creation of the program, which is administered through the denomination's Board of Global Ministries.

Shalom plans are designed to address the entire spectrum of human potential, including the spiritual as well as the economic. Meeting basic health and human needs and empowering people through organizing for political change are critical elements of the Shalom Zone strategy.

More than 380 Shalom Zones had emerged in the United States by 1998. Bishop Felton Edwin May, the first National Shalom Committee chair, encouraged a group of Washington area leaders to hold Shalom Zone training in Zimbabwe as part of the missional partnership forged between the Baltimore-Washington Conference and the United Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.

Shortly after Shalom Zone training at Hilltop in January 1998, church volunteers began Ishe Anesu as an after-school project for a handful of children in poverty-stricken Sakubva. Church leaders devel-

oped relationships with their parents and guardians. The adults, mostly women, eventually became involved in training programs, and today some of the same women are learning new skills while earning income by staffing the project's indigenous businesses.

Financial support from the Baltimore-Washington Conference helped transform volunteer roles into paid staff positions. Scholarships provided by the conference are helping pay the school fees of children whose future has been dramatically changed by Ishe Anesu. As the project grew, it won support from the Board of Global Ministries in paying the salary of a "missioner of hope" to oversee the program.

Other U.S. conferences have also become involved. The Holston Conference, for example, is helping underwrite the cost of the project's new building.

Because of political tension and the serious economic depression in Zimbabwe, Machinga knows that beginning new Shalom Zones will not be easy. He is increasingly spending his time and energy advocating with governmental offices for food on behalf of hungry people in the communities of his district.

Yet, with CNN reporting that the nation's rating for international investment has sunk to the absolute lowest position in the world, Machinga believes Shalom strategies for empowerment are imperative for economic restructuring in Zimbabwe.

Machinga helped begin a project in Gwese, a community in his district where the pastor, the Rev. Susan Manyange, had identified 300 children orphaned by AIDS. They persuaded local officials to donate a plot of land and raised money in district churches to buy seed and fertilizer. They hoped to begin a feeding program that might lead to the kind of empowerment programs offered at Hilltop.

The severe drought that has hit Zimbabwe this growing season has stalled these initial efforts at Gwese, but Machinga is determined.

"During hard times, that's when faith gets strong," he says. "We had a drought ... but we don't have a spiritual drought."

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