

New Life founders see new horizons in Zambia



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By Doug Long | FLUMC

Standing in the center of a small gathering in a Florida Conference meeting room in Lakeland recently, Josephine Mbilishi, director of the [New Life Center](#) in Kitwe, Zambia, commanded attention. Her soft, dignified voice carried across the room as she described the place in Central Africa nearly 8,000 miles away that she calls home.



Rev. Delbert Groves and wife, Sandy, first came to Zambia 18 years ago with "nothing in our hands but our suitcases," said Groves. They founded the New Life Center and witnessed tremendous growth in Methodism in the country.

Rev. Delbert Groves, who with his wife Sandy, founded the New Life Center 18 years ago, calls Mbilishi "a great woman of God" who speaks seven languages and is not in fear of "getting on a truck and heading out into the middle of nowhere and doing work."

"If you want to go to church in Zambia," she said, "it (often) means you congregate under a tree or in someone's house or in a classroom. Imagine being there on a rainy day or a cold day," she added, painting a picture of silhouettes gathered on an open plain a hundred miles wide and holding hands in prayer.

"As far as the church was concerned, it was a blank canvas," Groves said, speaking of the time they first came to Zambia leaving French-speaking Zaire in the Republic of Congo due to wars and unrest. "We had nothing in our hands but our suitcases." Then he said they found a piece of land and enough money to build on the dusty plains. The New Life Center was formed, bringing God and the Holy Spirit to a country where many still believe in cultural strongholds like sorcery and witchcraft—that in Grove's words create jealousies and fears.

"Congo was a country with a Methodist church that had been there for over a hundred years," he added. "There were thousands and thousands of churches." In coming to Zambia in 2000, they found only five active congregations and no churches. In the 18th year since their arrival to this English speaking country that was once a British colony, there are 250 congregations.

The New Life Center has grown, as well. It includes conference rooms and classrooms, printing presses and housing for 300 people. "There are so many ministries, it's hard to keep track of," Groves said jokingly. Their website lists such varied offerings as computer and global learning labs to youth empowerment camps. One of their more notable ministries over the years is [PET Zambia](#), started by Delbert and Sandy 27 years ago. It provides mobile carts to those disabled by things like polio, cystic fibrosis and land mines.



“We build about 50 a month and distribute them,” Groves said. “We can’t make them fast enough. It’s growing into the United States. They’re sending these things to over a hundred countries around the world.” He calls it its own form of evangelism. “This screams ‘God loves you; you are alive, we know you’re someone special,’” he said.

The Groves describe Zambia as a place with rich resources, but extreme poverty. More than 20 percent of the beans that form Starbucks coffee are planted here. Its western plains contain nearly one-third of the world’s copper reserves. The heavily mined land brings 1,000 trucks across Zambia’s borders daily—leading Groves to suggest he has his “Ph.D. in pothole driving.”

The country manufactures car batteries and grows sugar cane crops, although neither is exported, said Groves. In some cities, the couple reported that you’ll even find KFCs, Pizza Huts and Subway sandwiches—said to be an influence of nearby South African culture.



With the aid of sister church partners from the Florida Conference, congregations are able to build sanctuaries for the first time. Much needed resources include fuel to truck building materials to distant villages.

But few who live here see a revenue stream. “There’s 75 percent unemployment,” Groves reported, with blue-collar workers seldom exceeding \$2,000 a year. A family of five children can’t afford schooling, he said. Because of the AIDS pandemic, more than half the country is under age 15. The longtime missionaries say there is much work to be done.

“The canvas won’t be completed in my lifetime,” said Groves. But he quickly added, he and his wife just signed on for another three years.

The New Life Center is tutoring children and working with local pastors, offering books, resources and encouragement. Sister churches from the U.S. are helping Mbilishi and others to house sanctuaries. Often, a church partner buys cement, building supplies and fuel to truck materials across the landscape to distant villages. One man—described as a non-Methodist—travels the country to lay foundations. The local Zambians work to build the churches themselves.

“When a new church rises, it not only helps the congregation,” said Mbilishi, “but it helps the community around it.” She says that churches often become health centers and gathering places. “This has brought a lot of people to love Christ,” she added.

Today, the Delberts want to grow their ministry into the southern plains of the country with another New Life Center in Livingstone, about a two-day drive but a world apart, said Groves. “We’ve got a little place to lay our heads when we’re down there,” he said. “We’ve already purchased the land. We’re hoping to do some groundbreaking stuff this year.”

Groves, a self-proclaimed evangelist who said he likes leading people to Christ, says the need for the Church is great. "We know the need is there. We're just praying that the way the New Life Center in Kitwe has been able to help and respond to the Church in the north, it will be the exact same thing to the south.

"We are seeing the miracles take place," Groves said. "I am literally seeing the blind see the lame walk."

He also says they need help in this new mission.

"There are lots of ways to give," he emphasized, "but the best gift they can give us is to save a few dollars and get on a plane, come over and help.

"I can't think of anyplace we'd rather be," he said. "It's like living in the 21st century of Pentecost."

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Delbert, Sandy and Josephine Mbilishi, want to say thank you to Doug Long, managing editor for the Florida Conference. Wonderful job! Only one correction would be to give credit to Larry Hill for starting the PET ministry 27 years ago. Blessings, Doug, on you and your ministry!