
Microenterprise Development in Sudan
Jim Oakes

I spent a week in December 2007 in Liethom, Sudan, helping to launch Five Talents' latest microenterprise development initiative. It was not what I expected.

During the past eight years, I have traveled to East Africa at least once a year on a variety of mission activities, including microenterprise development, small business training and other related ventures. I have spent enough time in that part of the world that I was beginning to tell myself that I knew something about it. I was wrong. This trip was different.

I have had wonderful experiences in Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and other places in Africa, and I would recommend to anyone that they consider such a trip. What I have never seen before, however, is the utter devastation caused by the 20-year civil war that has recently ended in Sudan.

Southern Sudan – an area about the size of the southeastern United States – is an area where the poverty rate is among the highest in the world, where one in five children die before the age of 5, where the literacy rate is among the lowest in the world, and where virtually all infrastructure has been destroyed by war. There is not a single paved road in all of southern Sudan. The needs are endless.

Beyond the material needs, I met several former "child soldiers," young men who were forced into the military as children – some as young as 7 or 8 years old. These men, now in their 20s, are having to recover from the experience of having been forced into combat at such an early age. I was able to talk with a couple of them and learn of their determination to rebuild their lives. They need a place to start and have seen that Christ's transforming love can provide that starting place.

Five Talents' partnership with the Episcopal Church of Sudan, and with several other Christian agencies, will provide some practical assistance. Recognizing that helping people take that first step out of poverty can be a foundation for future growth, Five Talents is investing in a village bank that is helping more than 350 current members develop small businesses and start on the road to self sufficiency. I learned that the villagers were not interested in handouts but wanted to learn how running a business could help them become self-reliant. It is the only village bank within 112 miles and the demand for its services is growing weekly from aspiring entrepreneurs waiting to start their own businesses!

"If you plant, tend and harvest your own grain, you will be very careful how you use it. But, if someone gives it to you, you can finish it in a few days," said Santino Manut, newly-elected chairman of the Liethom Village Bank.

We cannot all travel to the Sudan. But, we can all pray for the reality of Christ's love to reach this tortured corner of the world, and we can look for practical ways to assist in the efforts of Five Talents and the other Christian organizations working there. For more information, visit the Five Talents Web site.

"Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more." (Matt. 25:20)