

Swahili Service at St. Francis Episcopal Church-Austin  
Commencing Sunday November 16, 2008

Our gratitude is to you and the entire Church family of St. Francis for agreeing to host us for our Sunday evening Kiswahili service. The refugees from Africa here in Austin who speak only Kiswahili, and others who love to hear and to speak the language, whether as native speakers or otherwise are our target group who, we believe appreciate this initiative. We never conducted a study and we did not have the statistics before we prayed and decided to have this service. Our plan was purely another evangelistic faith effort to bring people to know Christ and what we have found out during the process the last few months to this point has been encouraging and has given us an even clearer sense of what the need is like that will be met.

Baraka has made various efforts since 2004 to bring Austin Kenyans into the Church as a group but this has not succeeded. Kenyans prefer to go to different Churches of their choice and to come together once a month or so for fellowship or in case of an urgent need for them to meet. Our outreach efforts have been frustrating and difficult but we have not abandoned hope. The difficulties within the community have various causes. The tribal conflicts early this year in Kenya after a disputed presidential poll revealed the fractures in the community as political. Most Kenyans are fluent Kiswahili speakers and we shall continue to extend our invitation to them to be part of this service. Many Kenyans have lost proficiency speaking Kiswahili and, we hope some of them may be interested to come and relearn the language or in the case of the much younger ones, to learn it for the first time.

In the month of October, I met three refugees in their seventies who speak only Kiswahili and other tribal dialects which I myself can not speak. Their inability to communicate their needs properly makes their already bad situation worse and our outreach is only possible because I can speak the language. My emphasis is the Gospel message and hence our invitation and encouragement to them to come to worship. As we start the worship service this coming Sunday, November 16, 2008, we are confident of this work which the Lord has put ahead for us to do and know for sure other doors will open up to do more.

I earlier indicated my desire to start a fresh work among the poor and homeless at a spot behind the Central Library; thoughts definitely informed by what I already do at Loaves & Fishes on Tuesday mornings. The new Kiswahili service and having met the refugees from Africa changed the original idea and I now feel confident the Lord would have us go ahead in this new direction. I will continue the ministry on Tuesday mornings where I present a Bible study/homily and spend time to pray and to have brief conversations with those willing and thereafter proceed to work at 9.00AM. We shall continue to have the worship services at Arden Courts every first Saturday of the month.

You would be interested to know that I found the refugees during my search for a musician to play in our Kiswahili service. I approached Paula Blaha the Organist for ideas and especially asked if she knew of a musician who could play African music for

us. She mentioned an old refugee man from Rwanda that was an English student at an ESL class she had taught at the Central Presbyterian Church who played an African instrument. She took me to Daniel, a 70 years plus man who played this archaic looking instrument he had brought with him from Africa. Daniel played a song on his instrument but it immediately became clear to me the instrument could not be used in a Church setting to lead worship but could work well at other settings for entertainment purposes.

Daniel's music is extremely fascinating especially because he sings in his tribal dialect in a humming voice. His physical and spiritual self is totally engaged when he plays and sings on his instrument. Since then I have come to know him better and have visited him where he lives with Bernard another old man like himself. Both share an apartment on Rutland Lane, off North Lamar although they did not know each other before they arrived from Africa. Daniel told me how on his way here they wanted him to leave his instrument behind in Africa but he made it clear to the organizers of the evacuation that he would opt to stay and not board the plane. They finally agreed it could come also. With it he plays songs which help him stay connected with his past. He is reminded of when he lived in a refugee camp for 30 years as he plays his instrument. It is all he has of the former life and it is a reminder of where he came from since before his life in the refugee camps. No friend or family member of his exists to remind him who he is or where he came from except for the instrument and the music. It gives him an identity.

Severino is in his seventies and lives in the same neighborhood with his son who is married and two kids and his wife is expecting twins. The son has a job and lives in the same apartment complex. Other refugee families also live in the same compound and we continue to make ourselves known to them as days go by.

I would like to describe a little the life they live so it will become clear what our outreach looks like. These people will be better off after they gain more confidence once they can communicate with the wider community. This may happen if more interpreters are available to translate Kiswahili to English and vice versa and ultimately by them learning English. Their lives consist largely of absolutely necessary trips to visit the clinic or to the ESL class. When they are back home they normally watch TV the whole time. Traveling to the clinic or to the ESL class takes a while as they have to transfer from two or more bus routes to get to their destinations. When they have to see a doctor it is usually a very frustrating experience for them because they are not able to tell the doctor what exactly they are ailing from and the doctor can not properly communicate with them the diagnosis or to prescribe medications.

Soon after their government-assisted entry into the United States, many refugees who have fled their countries seeking political asylum are granted eight months of Medicaid, which covers health care needs such as physician's visits, medical tests, prescriptions and hospitalizations. During the eight months time frame, a refugee hopes to secure a job with benefits, grasp some level of the English language (by which he or she hopes to secure a job), learn about local customs, transportation and other systems and adjust to life as a new Texan. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, 4401 refugees entered Texas last year. The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department's

Refugee Health Screening Clinic is the sole agency designated to provide the initial health screenings for all refugees resettling in the greater Austin area. They have seen 587 new patients this year and all were referred to local primary care physicians after screening.

Referring a non-English speaking Medicaid recipient for an initial primary care visit (which may have the potential to be complex) is, surprisingly a challenge at times. For these individuals, interpreter services are a necessity for the first few months a new refugee is living in Austin, until he or she learns the basics of the English language. Some local Medicaid providers offer interpreter services, either through the telephone or live interpreters. However many do not, so as a result it often takes months before a refugee is seen by a primary care provider. Without timely access to non-urgent care, some unfortunately end up in the local Emergency Rooms.

Some of the refugees will opt to stay at home unless they absolutely have to go out, sitting in their apartments for long hours while watching the T.V. This tends to invite all kinds of temptations therewith. Daniel has to collect aluminum cans which he may sell to make extra money for toiletries. What he gets as Social Security only helps him with housing and not much else. I am taking time to explain to them about the different services around the Austin area to get things like groceries (Micah 6 Food Pantry which is open on Thursdays and Saturdays, HEB gift cards and Bus passes (All Saints Episcopal Church) and other services as I learn about these. Anyone with additional helpful information would do well to let us know.

A few could not attend Church last Sunday because of lack of transportation. I brought a few with me and as we parted after dropping them off later on, they asked me to make sure they are able to get to Church next Sunday. I need assistance with transportation especially because the Capitol Metro public transport system seems to be particularly bad on Sundays when they seem to operate on a skeleton crew. A few who came last Sunday live in the North Austin area on Rutland Lane, about one mile off North Lamar Boulevard, which is about 4 miles or so from the Church.

There are a number of ways to help out. One way would be to offer one's time and/or vehicle as and when available to transport those who wish to come to Church on Sunday evenings and take them back after Church. Church is about one and a half hours (2 hours max.) cumulative time. Bus passes is another way to help and they could line up early Tuesday mornings at Loaves & Fishes or we could ourselves look into how to buy a few for those we know through the Church for use during other days of the week. Bus passes cost \$19 each for a 30 day period pass and \$7 each for a 7 day pass period. When bought through an agent like Loaves & Fishes, the cost comes down by 50% to be 9.50 each for 30 days and 3.50 for 7 days respectively. HEB gift cards are always appreciated by many if not by all of them.

If it all seems impossible, then I believe that is what it needs to be because it is God's work and not ours. We can just do what God enables us to do and nothing more or less.