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Giving more than food for Darfur

Mishawaka church member discovers a soul-to-soul connection on trip.

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Tribune Staff Writer

When's the last time you've seen black children scream in horror at white folks because of a skin color that they rarely -- if ever -- see?

Or when have you washed the feet of a sheik?

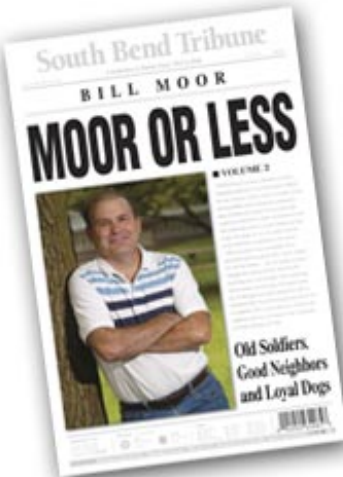
Consider what happened on this trip.



Chuck Strantz, of Vineyard Community Church in Mishawaka, gives candy to children in a Darfur village in Sudan. He used the candy as a way for the kids to overcome their fright of white people, who they aren't used to seeing.

Photos provided

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The mission

Go to the bloodied, war-torn Darfur region of Sudan. See what's happening with the food aid that Mishawaka's Vineyard Community Church bought last summer when kids begged and adults thinned their wallets.

By September, as the church wrapped up its campaign with more

than \$12,000 in hand, Darfur's political crisis thickened. A peace accord went awry. There was a Sudanese government offensive and attacks by rogue rebel groups. Aid groups left.

Then the treachery subsided just enough to let South Bend-based LeSEA Global

Word on Sudan

Chuck Strantz says he's willing to speak about the Sudan projects at churches and civic groups. Call him at (574) 291-3292.

Feed the Hungry send the aid that Vineyard raised.

In January, Feed the Hungry Director Stefan Radelich called on Vineyard's pastor, the Rev. Mark Pope, to join him to see the aid in Darfur. Pope had schedule conflicts. So the church paid for church member Chuck Strantz to go on the weeklong mission.

Strantz was ready. His first trip to Africa. Also a graphic artist who's employed by LeSEA, he'd passed up a chance last year to go on a LeSEA mission trip to Costa Rica, holding out for a chance to visit Darfur.

Pope gave Strantz a task: Find new ways that Vineyard can help the people in Darfur.

The risks

There had been reports of aid workers whom rebels had raped, beaten or killed, says Radelich, who led Strantz on the trip. Aid groups reported goods or vehicles that the rebels ambushed and looted.

Strantz also expected all kinds of bureaucratic delays. But the whole week was just the opposite.

They moved in relative peace and calm, Radelich says, as their vehicle was escorted in the front and back by heavily armored cruisers of the African Union. They didn't ask for the security. But it seemed these members of the AU, a 7,000-strong peacekeeping force that is considered to be underfunded and ill-equipped, were eager to show good will.

"There were a lot of doors opened because of the amount of prayer that backed us," Strantz says.

The delivery

The original plan was to use the Vineyard money to send dehydrated rice meals made and donated by a Minnesota nonprofit organization. The money would enable about 275,000 meals to be transported, out of a total of 1.3 million meals that Feed the Hungry would have sent.

But, while it was too unsafe to send, the charity used Vineyard money to buy in Sudan and distribute about 100,000 pounds of sorghum, a staple food ingredient used to make porridge and flat bread -- with an additional 40,000 to come, Radelich says.

Aside from the Vineyard dollars, he said, Feed the Hungry will ship about two semitrailers full of the rice meals in March, plus three more to come.

The payoff

Strantz and Radelich came to an area of four villages that had combined after they'd been ransacked and burned out by the janjaweed militia.

The people told them that relief workers hadn't visited for months. Many of the people had never seen a white person. That explained why kids yelled in fright. Strantz bought some hard candy, handed it out and quickly won the kids' favor.

The bags of sorghum also built relationships, he says. One church distributed the food to village folks -- 200 allotments for church members, 600 for others in the community, says Radelich, who believes that helped the church to grow from one

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church to four.

Strantz says he approached the sheik, who is head of the village, about the biblical story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, then washed the sheik's feet.

At first, Strantz says, Darfur seems hopelessly mired in poverty.

"What gives me hope is that we're distributing food through churches that are giving them something else to live for," he said, alluding to the Christian faith. "We have a common teaching through the body of Christ."

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