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# A little office that reaches a continent

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 20, 2012

Jacques Bahati and Melaura Homan-Smith conduct a town hall meeting with artisanal gold miners in Congo's South Kivu province in February. (Courtesy of AFJN)

The offices of the Africa Faith and Justice Network are tucked into a corner of the fourth floor of a building on the campus of Trinity College in Washington, D.C. On the wall, a map of Africa is covered with pins to which are tied strings leading to little slips of paper that surround the map. Each slip of paper lists the name of the country and the different religious orders working within its borders. This little office reaches an entire continent.

The map points to the network?s past and present. The organization was founded almost 30 years ago by returning missionaries who realized two things. ?The images in the media and even in religious media, didn?t match the Africa they had come to know,? explained Dominican Fr. Aniedi Okure, executive director of the network. ?Second, what happens in the halls of Congress has effects in Africa and they are often negative.? And so the Africa Faith and Justice Network was formed with two missions: to educate about Africa and to advocate for just relations between the U.S. and the peoples of Africa.

The network tries to call attention to efforts in Africa aimed at promoting social justice. AFJN policy analyst Jacques Bahati mentions the Kamenge Youth Center, located in a slum in war-torn Burundi. The slum in Bujumbura was located between neighborhoods from the warring tribes. Tutsi and Hutu youth had to enter and exit the grounds of the center from different portals because of ethnic strife. Once inside, the children played together effortlessly. The center then launched a project to rebuild houses, employing older children from both ethnic groups. The Africa Faith and Justice Network tries to get the U.S.

government to assist such projects, encouraging native initiatives instead of the old top-down model of government assistance. Today, the Kamenge Youth Center has some 37,000 members.

Earlier this year, AFJN worked with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to bring Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola, president of the bishops? conference in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to testify on Capitol Hill. The U.S. Congress was debating the implementation of Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank law, which deals with sourcing conflict minerals. In Africa, the blessing of natural resources such as precious minerals is often experienced as a curse, when competing warlords fight for control of the commodities. The Africa Faith and Justice Network also solicited testimony from miners in Africa and entered that into the congressional record. ?Our message was simple,? Bahati said. ?Issue strong rules [for implementing Section 1502] and follow the intent of Congress, which was to deny militias the profits from these sales of conflict minerals.?

Another long-term project at the network is to avoid the militarization of U.S. foreign policy in Africa. The group has written to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, asking that the Nigerian Muslim organization Boko Haram not be designated a terrorist organization. Okure organized a conference on Boko Haram earlier this year at The Catholic University of America in Washington, bringing together policy experts and activists as well as the State Department?s chief official on Nigeria to discuss the organization, its homegrown roots, and why U.S. efforts to lump it together with al-Qaida would be disastrous. Last year, Bahati wrote an article urging nonviolent methods for dealing with Joseph Kony?s Lord?s Resistance Army. To further these and other efforts, the network participates in host of gatherings, such as the Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace With Justice, where they present papers and workshops on issues of mutual concern. And, they encourage less policy-heavy projects as well. St. Catharine Academy in the Bronx, N.Y., and Foothills School in Boise, Idaho, are now partnered with churches in Africa. A church in the Congo recently received volleyballs and soccer balls from the school in Idaho.

The network?s staff is ecumenical. Okure and Bahati are joined in their work by Melaura Homan-Smith, program and development assistant. A Quaker, Homan-Smith learned about the AFJN?s work at a coalition meeting and became intrigued. Two interns this summer are helping with the many tasks the group undertakes: Rubea Stouppe, a Presbyterian who studies at Hastings College in Nebraska, and Ashagrie Abdi, a native of Ethiopia who just completed a degree at Northwestern University School of Law in Chicago.

?We are coming out of the church?s mission,? Okure said. ?We are missionaries of justice and telling the truth. The truth is one of the casualties of modern society, usually for the sake of the dollar.? He does not underestimate the enormity of the tasks. In addition to the corporate neocolonialism that besets Africa, and the armed militias, the continent is becoming, literally, a dumping ground for the West. ?A company in the Netherlands dumped waste in the Ivory Coast,? Okure gave as an example. ?They didn?t remove it; they only paid $150 in compensation to those affected in exchange for the victims signing a legal document promising not to take the company to court.? He noted that the recent crash of a commercial jet in Nigeria involved a jet no longer able to meet U.S. safety standards. ?For the future, in many ways, we feel like we have a bucket and we are standing in front of an ocean. But when we drop our bucket into the world, we make change, inch by inch. We touch people even if it is something as little as getting a soccer ball to some poor children.?

The Africa Faith and Justice Network runs on a ?shoestring? budget, Okure said. It does not take government money and is mostly supported by the religious orders with whom it works. The group?s website has a button for donations. It is amazing how much the network does with so little -- the workshops, the articles in newspapers, the congressional testimony, the fact-finding missions in Africa, the building of relationships. The network is like the people of the continent it serves, who may be impoverished economically, but whose spiritual riches have already made it the fastest-growing region within the Catholic church.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at

NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic, first-place finisher for Best Individual Blog in the 2012 the Catholic Press Association competition.]

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