

# Zambian farm becomes flourishing Ag Centre

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*Staff Writer*

Reverend Paul Webster is no stranger when it comes to agricultural practices in the Midwest. Growing up in America's Heartland, Webster could have easily stayed in the area to farm.

Instead, he wanted to combine his passion for agriculture with a calling to help others—he wanted to become a global missionary, so he did.

For the past 14 years, Webster has been serving as a missionary with the Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church at the Mujila Falls Agriculture Centre in Kanyama, Zambia.

Every three years, he and his right-hand-man, Andre Kanjimana, return to the States to deliver a routine progress update.

Many members of the United Methodist churches across Faribault County, including those in Blue Earth, Elmore, Winnebago and Wells, have given donations to the Ag Centre.

For their second time, Webster and Kanjimana visited Faribault County from August 8-14 to spend time speaking with citizens, and previous donors, about the progress made at the Ag Centre.

Webster began working at the Agriculture Centre in Zambia in 2000. At the time, the land was entirely desolate.

Those who were living in the area, the Lunda Tribe, were facing incredible hardships—they had the highest infant mortality rate in Zambia and life expectancy averaged only 32 years.

Recognizing these grave difficulties, Lunda Chief Kanyama asked the Zambian government to send a missionary, as he had seen how beneficial missionaries had been in the Congo, the country directly north of Zambia.

The unusually low life expectancy and devastatingly high infant mortality rate were two side effects of the Lunda peoples' way of life: the Lunda were one of the last hunter-gatherer societies in the world, and they relied on the remarkably dwindling reserves of wild game and vegetation.

"The challenge was trying to teach people who were still living 3,000 years in the past. We're seeing some of the last hunter-gatherer peoples on Earth," Webster explains.

With a dramatic decline in vegetation and wild game, Webster and his wife Roxanne arrived just in time to put their missionary expertise to work.

"When I arrived, they were drinking powdered milk left by other missionaries," Webster says. "I saw several goats milling around and asked why they didn't milk them. They laughed in response, never having learned that you can milk a goat and get nutrients from the milk."

Webster's primary mission was to prevent infant death and prolong the lives of the Lunda people by teaching them how to produce food so they could eventually become a self-sustaining society.

"When we first came, our main goal was to increase protein and vitamin and mineral intake in order to address the high infant mortality rate and get rid of the extreme protein deficiencies,"

he says.

Milk and eggs are essential to the decline of infant deaths because of the protein and vitamin content, so Webster began by teaching workers simple techniques such as milking goats and collecting eggs from chickens brought in from Uganda.

Later, he taught the workers how to plant and harvest crops using oxen. Fields remained small until 2011 when Webster purchased a tractor and a planter for the farm using money donated to the Agriculture Centre. Crop yield increased as the size of the fields increased.

In 2000, Kanyama had the lowest maize production, but by 2013, the Agriculture Centre was the number one producer of maize in Zambia.

"We wanted to demonstrate that maize production is possible," Webster says. "They can be as good as any other farmers in the world as long as they have the right tools."

Within 14 years, Mujila Falls Agriculture Centre went from desolate wasteland to 2,500 acres of agricultural wealth and prosperity.

The Centre now produces more than 3,500 eggs each day, several kinds of fruits and vegetables, milk from cows and goats, maize, Swiss chard, sorghum and, most recently, soybeans.

"Older people in Zambia are very short because of a lack of nutrients during their growing phase. Now the kids are much taller, healthier and stronger, and the infant mortality rate has significantly decreased," Webster reports.

Because of the vast

economic growth in Kanyama, the Zambian government has invested in a cell phone tower for the Ag Centre and within the next few years, the government plans to build a dam on the Mujila River to provide hydroelectric energy and, eventually, electricity.

"They need to work very hard to catch up with the rest of the world, but I really think they could succeed," Webster says.

Next on the agenda is to purchase a disc plough, which will make cultivating land easier for the workers who currently cultivate land using either an ox-cart or their hands. But the Ag Centre is also in need of a boom sprayer.

"We need herbicides so that the weeds don't choke out the crop," Webster explains. "We're limited to planting taller corn so that it will fan out and create shade where weeds won't grow. We're always fighting against weed growth."

Providing the Lunda people with the tools necessary to raise and butcher animals, as well as plant and harvest crops, is due in part to the donations given by Faribault County residents.

"I thank the churches so much," says Andre Kanjimana with a grin. "Their donations help teach the people to grow food and change the lives of Zambian people. I had to see before I learned, and now I can help to change peoples' lives."

Webster and Kanjimana will return to Faribault County in 2017 for another progress update.

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