

The following describes the Kiswahili Ministry at Redeemer Lutheran Church, East Falls, Philadelphia

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1998, a Tanzanian family, making their home in the East Falls neighborhood of Philadelphia, joined Redeemer Lutheran Church. Stanley Meena and Selina Mbowe and their infant sons, Kevin and Alec (who was born into our community), were embraced by the people of Redeemer Lutheran Church. Kevin and Alec were both baptized here. For the past decade this family grew in involvement in our church. Several more of their extended family joined our congregation over this time span. In 2006, Stanley was elected president of the congregation. Their presence in our community has continually drawn many visitors with roots in East African culture. We came to know many of them as “regulars.”

In 2005, we had a visiting supply pastor from Botswana. In conversation after church, we talked about our interest in a Swahili ministry. He recommended that we talk with Rev. Perucy Butiku. Shortly thereafter, we began monthly services in Swahili under her leadership. Pastor Butiku traveled once a month from New York City. The community grew to about 30 participants. This outreach effort of the Redeemer congregation was recognized the next spring at SEPA Synod Assembly. However, after a year or so, attendance began to wane for a variety of reasons and services were suspended, but the idea did not die.

Over the course of several months, Redeemer congregation analyzed the problems affecting attendance at Swahili worship. We determined that there was still interest which would best be fostered if we made an effort to find local professional leadership and took steps to make sure Swahili participants, whether they were members or not, had more direct leadership roles in developing their own worship experience. We assigned two council members of Tanzanian background to spearhead the revival of this ministry. Things took off quickly. A first service was held in March 2007 with the intention of worship being a monthly event, but the group immediately determined that they wanted to worship weekly. Pastor Ipyana Mwakabonga, an ordained pastor from Tanzania enrolled in courses at Mt. Airy Seminary, provided leadership. By June, there were 60 participants worshipping regularly and Redeemer reported their growing ministry effort to the synod in June 2007.

In July, Pastor Ipyana had to leave his leadership role because he was assigned to a seminary internship in Florida. The Rev. Dr. Festo Mutashobya, who had been worshipping regularly with our group, was asked to fill his position. Today, our group includes people from East, Central and West Africa, who love to speak and hear the Word in Swahili and who enjoy the mutual support our members provide one another. A large core group lives in the immediate vicinity of Redeemer but others come from the broader Delaware Valley.

OUR WORSHIP SITE

Redeemer Lutheran Church in East Falls, is our congregational home. Many of us had been searching for a worship home and this congregation welcomed us. In September, 49 of us elected to become members of this congregation. We had been operating with a separate leadership group, but Redeemer invited us to choose members from our community to fill empty seats on their church council. We chose Prisca Mutashobya, Primus Muganyizi and Emmanuel Bandawe. Stanley Meena as council president then appointed them to serve on Redeemer's council, a provision provided by Redeemer's constitution. Their membership was to be affirmed at the next Congregational Annual Meeting, which was held on February 24, 2007. At this meeting, Prisca asked to go off council, citing a sense of conflict of interest since her husband had become regular supply pastor. Emmanuel had not proven to be active on council. Their seats were filled by the congregation's election of two other members of our community, Mwesigwa Mutashobya and Leticia Francis. (A third member from the English-speaking membership was also elected to complete the Class of 2011.) Selina Mbowe and Amanda Bomani, having held membership at Redeemer for 11 and 8 years respectively, were already members of Redeemer's Council and

Stanley Meena continues as president of the congregation, so we felt very well represented and part of the ministry of the whole congregation.

The Kiswahili membership of Redeemer is well connected to the East African presence in the Delaware Valley and we are effective in working our cultural network.

VISION

Our vision is one of a Global Village. It is our desire to see that all Christian believers meet regularly and be organized as a Christian body in our city and around the Delaware Valley. We want to encourage, counsel and build a sound doctrine, and to be ready to give any kind of support—materially, financially, physically and spiritually. At present we meet on Sundays for worship and fellowship. Bible Study, held in English for the whole community but under our Kiswahili leadership, meets Wednesday evenings. Praise and Worship in any language is held on the last Saturday of the month, also under the leadership of Kiswahili members. In addition, frequent prayer services are called as prayer is key to our spiritual lives.

From the beginning of our relationship with Redeemer Lutheran Church, unity was fostered even as independent freedom of expression in worship was encouraged. Over the last year we have grown close to the English-speaking membership and have worked together on several major projects, all of which were successful and spiritually uplifting. These include a mid-summer goat roast social, a congregational auction as fundraiser, a Christmas Cantata and Concert, and united worship on Christmas Eve. Many members of Redeemer, both English and Swahili, commented on how moving the singing of Silent Night was, alternating verses in both languages. This is a practice we incorporate whenever translations of popular hymns are available.

At its recent Annual Congregational Meeting, Redeemer designated first Sundays of the month Unity Sundays at the suggestion of Kiswahili members. Worship at these services will use both languages with an attempt to share culture and worship ideas. A customized liturgy is being developed that uses both Swahili and English. We feel that interaction with the English-speaking members is important in encouraging the longevity of our ministry as we recognize that our children will be active participants in the English-speaking world, attending neighborhood schools and participating in neighborhood sports and activities.

The multicultural nature of our ministry stretches beyond English and Swahili. Our Christmas events attracted French-speaking and Hispanic members of the community.

MISSION

The Swahili-speaking Christians of the Delaware Valley believe that now is the time to come together and get united in Praising the Lord and to bring our children into the environment where they will remain faithful to Our Almighty God.

While we would like from time to time to use our Swahili language in worship, we know that English will continue to be used and will by necessity have some dominance if we are to accommodate both Swahili-speaking and English-speaking members of our community. Our major emphasis is to remain faithful to the Lord and our countries and to be ready to use our talents to reach out in our respective communities areas of service. We want all to serve and come to know Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This was manifested at our Christmas Concert when one of our members who works in social services met a teenage single mother in the neighborhood through her work. She invited her to the Christmas concert where this young Hispanic mother handed her baby to someone and stood up and sang a solo. After Christmas, our community immediately began discussing ways to assist this family.

Our mission is not centered on preservation of things Swahili but rather worshiping and serving God through celebration of our culture and heritage while integrating into the communities in which we live—enjoying our culture, sharing our culture and worshiping in ways which are meaningful to us and will spread the Gospel to others regardless of their cultural background.

LEADERSHIP

Virtually everyone involved in our community plays a leadership role. Youngest children are acolytes, readers, and ushers. Several soloists are able to lead call and response choruses. Others lead Bible study and prayer services. We worked together with the English-speaking members to put together a Christmas Cantata which featured both adult singers and a children's choir. 20 people took part in the Cantata and we are currently working to put together an Easter Cantata which we wrote ourselves. Our Swahili Choir traveled to New York City to sing for Pastor Butiku's church and were featured in a newspaper story. Fellowship events are organized and led by many others. In our community, no one sits idly in the pew!

As previously noted, historically, a visiting supply pastor to Redeemer who was from Botswana recommended Pastor Butiku for leadership. She remains supportive. Pastor Ipyana Mwakabonga revived the ministry. When Pastor Ipyana had to leave to fulfill a seminary internship, Redeemer member, Dr. Festo Mutashobya, supplied and continues to provide leadership to both the Swahili-speaking and English-speaking communities. The president of Redeemer's Council is Mr. Stanley Meena, who bridges both communities. Two thirds of Redeemer's Church Council is of Kiswahili heritage.

Our leaders are people of resilience, ingenuity, and creativity. We could have given up when our initial attempts at Swahili ministry failed, but we were able to regroup, analyze the problems and find better ways to accomplish what was obviously a worthwhile goal.

We strongly desire to continue our ministry with Pastor Festo Mutashobya. Redeemer council sent a resolution to SEPA Synod on October 31, 2007 (Reformation Day) to formally call him to serve Redeemer Lutheran Church. Pastor Festo agreed to our payment terms and indicated he was willing to commit five years to ministry with us. We have had no response to our request to call Pastor Festo to date. It remains our desire to do so.

We think our approach to multicultural ministry — the celebration of our heritage as we merge with other communities — shows promise for our community's longevity as we build new lives in the United States. In addition to the 49 Kiswahili members who joined our congregation last fall, we are currently in conversation with several others expressing an interest in joining. We believe that by next October we will be able to add at least a dozen more people to our role, making Redeemer Lutheran Church one of the fastest growing churches in the area.

CONTACT

Our people are full members of Redeemer Congregation, hence the Redeemer Church Council is responsible for everyday activities and running of our congregation. Swahili-speaking members are well represented on this council. President Stanley Meena is the main contact for our congregation.

Submitted by Redeemer Church Council
Stanley Meena, President