

Medical truck full of shoes, clothes is bound for Congo

By Dylan Scott
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

George Howard has seen the children — and the need — in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

He has visited the Kamina Children's Home in Katanga province five times as director of connectational ministry for the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church.

"These are some of the most wounded people you'll ever meet," he said. "No one should witness the things these children have witnessed."

Help is on the way. More than 700 pairs of shoes and 1,300 pounds of donated clothes, collected in just three weeks, are packed into the biggest gift the people of Katanga, population 4.1 million, probably will ever see: a tractor-trailer converted into a doctor's office.

OhioHealth donated its retired Wellness on Wheels vehicle to the United Methodist Church in Katanga, where rural residents don't have access to modern health care.

That's where this 48-foot trailer — featuring two exam rooms, one counseling room, two bathrooms and a waiting room — will come in handy.

The journey begins next week. The old rig, worth about \$150,000 when it was renovated in 1993, will be driven to Baltimore, Md., and head to sea on a ferry bound for Durban, South Africa.

It will travel by rail into the

The rig will be driven to Baltimore, ride a ferry to South Africa, and go by rail to the Congo.

Congo. The vehicle will stop in Lubumbashi, the capital of Katanga, but the clothes and shoes will continue to the orphanage.

Lea Blackburn, OhioHealth's director of community partnerships, called the whole situation a "moment of serendipity."

Almost as soon as the new Wellness on Wheels, a 400-square-foot facility worth about \$320,000, was unveiled in April, OhioHealth found a worthy recipient for the old one. Wellness on Wheels serves pregnant teens in the Columbus area.

Bishop Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda's delegation from Katanga was touring health-care facilities in the area, including the new medical trailer, as part of the West Ohio Conference on May 16.

Immediately after viewing the new mobile facility, Blackburn said, Ntambo "looked at me, through the interpreter, and said 'Where's the old one?'"

Blackburn didn't hesitate. "When something just looks at you like that, it's so meant to be," she said.

Pam Ilumga, Ntambo's son-in-law, stressed the impact that the facility could have in his homeland.

"It's like a revolution in

health care," he said.

Medical care in the Congo is mostly in big cities, where the hospitals and clinics are. Poor citizens in rural areas must either find a way to get to a city — which often is difficult because of the cost or physical limitations — or risk going without attention for an extended time.

The mobility of the unit is a key. It might stop in a village for several weeks, but the goal will be to spread the care as much as possible. Ilumga said. Even health care that most Americans take for granted, such as X-rays and mammograms, will be new to the villages.

The donations of the rig, the shoes from Milner's Shoes and the clothes will help alleviate both local health concerns, such as malaria and parasitic diseases, and the dirtied and bloodied feet of the orphans.

Jim Milner said Ntambo made a big impression when he spoke in front of the Hilltop Kiwanis Club, where Milner is secretary.

"I was very impressed not only with him, but the fact that there's such a need there," said Milner, whose business is focused on specialized foot care. "It's a totally different life."

With the local children's shoe business falling, Milner had amassed a surplus of children's shoes. After hearing of the situation in the Congo, Milner felt it was a perfect fit. "I've got plenty in stock," he quipped.

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