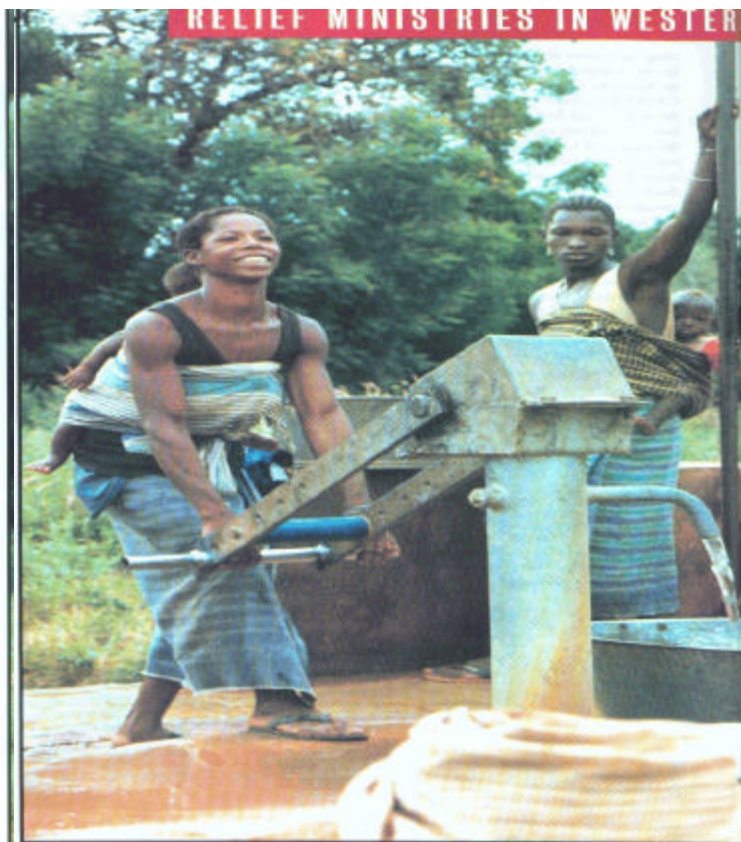


Showing Christ's Love in Burkina Faso

By
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In the village of Kouentou, a strong fetish town in Burkina Faso, being a Christian complicated even the smallest details of life. Every morning, the Christian women would try to get up earlier than the other women of the village and be at the village wells first. But arriving first didn't always make the task easier. The other village women often hassled the Christians and sometimes chased them away from the wells because of their faith in Christ.

Continued problems led the Christians to move out of the lower valley area of the village to the higher northern side. Despite the move, they continued to walk about a kilometer to town to get their water. But the situation became more and more difficult, and finally they decided to dig their own well. But after a month of digging, they had dug only three meters because they hit sandstone.

That was when they asked CAMA Services, the relief arm of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, for assistance. It became apparent to us that a jackhammer and dynamite would be required to finish the digging. At a depth of about 16 meters, we hit an artesian well, rapidly raising the level of water in the well. Even with the compressor we were using, the quantity of water exceeded our ability to empty the well. It was obvious to the villagers that only God could provide this amount of water.

Ironically, the following year the village wells went dry for the first time ever. This gave the Christians a unique opportunity to reach out to the people who had hassled them at the village wells by inviting the villagers to come and draw water at their well. In a very real sense, physical water became living, spiritual water as the Christians actively demonstrated Christ's love.

Finding Real Solutions

Helping to meet physical needs of the people has been CAMA Services' philosophy of ministry in Burkina Faso since CAMA started working in the country 13 years ago. Since 1985, when a severe famine ravaged the country, CAMA Services has been demonstrating the genuineness of the Christian faith by reaching out to people's physical needs in the name of Christ. Famine relief turned into famine prevention as we sought to help the people of the Eglise de l'Alliance Chretienne (Alliance Church of Burkina Faso) find real solutions to the problems instead of just

treating the symptoms of the problems. As a result, this has become a long-term commitment instead of simply a response to surface needs.

One of the Poorest Countries

Burkina Faso, a country low in natural resources, is ranked one of the world's 10 poorest countries. About 80 percent of the residents live in Burkina's rural areas, surviving only by subsistence agriculture. This has created a need for CAMA Services' involvement in food security activities like cereal banks, drip irrigation gardening and an extensive water program. Water, so often taken for granted in other parts of the world that its value is forgotten, is a precious commodity in Burkina Faso. However, not only is water scarce here, but less than 20 percent of the people have access to clean water.

The church provided a natural vehicle for carrying out social ministries such as famine prevention. A side benefit was the good testimony and visibility that this kind of ministry provided for the Alliance Church in Burkina Faso.

From the beginning, it was the desire of CAMA Services to work toward completely turning these ministries over to the church. Our ultimate goal, as with any missionary endeavor, was to work ourselves out of a job. We recognized that the idea for a church-led compassion ministry needed to come from the inside if it was going to succeed. As we worked hand-in-hand with the church over the years, we continued to explore and develop this idea. We were excited when, in 1993, the church indicated a desire to begin taking over the ministry.

On November 20, 1993, a study commission met to consider the transition in turning control of the ministry over, as well as finding the right person to run these ministries. The timing was right, and by the second meeting one month later, the new organization was named ACCÉDES (Alliance Chretienne pour la Cooperation Economique et le DEVELOPPement Social) and the bylaws and statutes had been written, with an operational budget in the works.

The most critical issue was locating someone with a university education who wasn't already employed or who was willing to leave current employment to serve the church. This individual would need good English skills to represent the church's need to donor agencies through fund-raising, correspondence and reports.

Man for the Hour

Robert Sanou was the primary candidate. However, he was already directing the new Alliance high school (Lycee Prive Maranatha) in the town of Bobo Dioulasso (also one of the projects that CAMA Services helped start). This school had just opened but was already having both an educational and a spiritual impact.

In Burkina Faso, only 50 to 60 percent of the rural villages have schools. Only 35 percent of school-aged children ever have the opportunity to attend school, and only about 15 percent of the Burkinabe ever make it to the fourth grade, the minimum level required to maintain literacy. At the secondary level, the situation is even more critical with a very few schools available nationwide. The Maranatha High School in a few short years had already established itself academically among the top schools in the city of Bobo Dioulasso.

The school also was having a tremendous spiritual impact. Less than 5 percent of the student body come from Christian homes, with well over 80 percent coming from Muslim backgrounds. Most are there because of the level of academic excellence the school maintains. The Eglise de l'Alliance Chretienne recognized a unique opportunity to reach these young people with the gospel and placed a full-time chaplain at the school. The results have been tremendous, with 40 to 80 students coming to the Lord each year.

Robert's decision to leave a promising career was not easy, and yet his educational background and administrative experience made him the prime candidate. Friends and family advised him against going to work for a new ministry that had not yet proven itself. He was also being solicited by a prestigious private law firm that wanted him to become a lawyer, since his university training was in law. But the Lord had already prepared Robert's heart, and he was open to whatever the Lord might bring his way.

In August 1994, Robert Sanou became the first national project coordinator for the ministries of ACCÉDES. CAMA Services subsidized some of the administrative costs for the first year, but the long-term success of the program would be measured in its ability to become self-supporting. The selection of the right leader was critical to the overall success of the ACCÉDES programs, but there were other factors as well. We did not want CAMA Services' presence to hinder the growth of this new organization. So, shortly after ACCÉDES assumed the leadership role, we moved to the capital city of Ouagadougou, 240 miles away. This had a very positive effect on the work as we were close enough to provide support, yet far enough away to permit Robert to make his own decisions.

After a trip to Europe, where Robert was introduced to European donor groups, it was obvious that he had a natural ability to communicate his vision and desired direction for ACCÉDES. We were pleased with the strong support we received from the donors. This was a confirmation to both CAMA Services and ACCÉDES that we were moving in the right direction.

Training has also been a key factor in

the transition. Robert has had the opportunity to attend programs at home and abroad on project proposal writing, disaster management, gardening, drip irrigation, management and development. In December 1997, he was able to attend a conference for the Association of Evangelicals of Africa held in South Africa, which included three days on the importance of the church in addressing social concerns.

This training has in turn been used to teach the project facilitators within each Alliance district these techniques, placing a special emphasis on financial accountability and proper management of funds. The facilitators are learning the necessity of providing timely and transparent financial reports. The results are obvious in the quality of work that has been produced. Three years after it began its work here in Burkina Faso, ACCÉDES is totally self-supported with office staff and facilities. Also, through Robert's skilled leadership, ACCÉDES has not only picked up all the projects that CAMA Services was doing before his arrival, but has been able to increase the sphere of intervention and expand its donor base.

Making a Difference

We arrived in Ouagadougou in December 1986, excited about heading up the CAMA Services work in Burkina Faso. However, we found that specifics of our job description were not as clear as we had hoped. We were to provide "relief" assistance but were given very few other directives. As a result, our first two years were somewhat frustrating as we struggled with determining the role that CAMA Services was to play.

From this very uncertain beginning, we have been blessed to watch the outreach blossom into a viable church-based ministry that is reaching out and meeting the needs of hurting people in the name of Jesus Christ. The ACCÉDES organization, though young in its development, has exceeded expectations in leading the church in its focus on compassion ministries.

This is the direct result of God's hand upon a very capable leader Robert Sanou. He continues to grow with the job and has a deeper understanding of development issues in Burkina Faso. His leadership has challenged me in my personal commitment to allowing the gospel to reach the whole man. By working with him, I continue to be stretched in my understanding of the often complex issues of helping people respond to their own needs in culturally appropriate ways. An additional personal benefit is the development of the relationship between us. Through sharing our experiences, Robert and I have become true co-laborers and genuine friends as we strive to reach out compassionately to people's physical hurts in an effort to show them Christ.

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