

Beaumont chaplain builds school in Nigerian hometown

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## Beaumont chaplain builds school in Nigerian hometown



Homes in Ogoli-Ipangbo, Nigeria.

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Father Philemon Okoh stands with residents of Ogoli-Ipangbo, Nigeria.

Imagine sending your child to a school that has only bare walls and no roof, books or floor.

Imagine, too, a school so small it only goes through second grade.

Now, imagine being grateful for that school.

That's the situation in Ogoli-Ipangbo, Nigeria, the hometown of the Rev. Philemon Okoh, a Roman Catholic priest who is a chaplain at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

Okoh also celebrates masses and administers the sacraments as needed around the Archdiocese of Detroit, especially in northern Oakland and southern Lapeer counties.

Though he's been a priest here since 2005, he's maintained ties to his hometown. His latest project is St. Philemon's Academic Center for Excellence Nursery and Primary School, which started in 2009 on roughly 70 acres of land that was donated for a school, clinic or farm.

"We planned to start with 60 children," Philemon said, "but we ended up with 120 the first year. This year we have between 170 and 200."

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Just this year, he was able to provide uniforms for the students of the private Christian school. There is a five-member board overseeing operations, but there are no government- or church-controlled projects in this remote part of Nigeria. While there are some other schools in the area, "they are not up to the standard" Philemon hopes to provide at the academy.

The children learn to read, write and speak English -- the language that unifies Nigeria, which has 250 native tongues. The West African nation is the African continent's most populous country.

The five teachers cover the curriculum using charcoal on a flat piece of plywood. Classes continue until about noon, when the children drink growel, a beverage of water, balsam plant, sugar, flour and corn.

There's a noon recess but no playground, as yet, or toys. Afterward, the older children go back for more classes until around 2 p.m. There are three terms each year: The first from September until Christmas, the second from January until Easter and the third from Easter through July.

Philemon recently returned to Nigeria to perform the marriage of his sister, Alice, and her new husband, Abraham. He also brought supplies and some of his American friends: Maxine Galiati of Lapeer, Dr. Janet Heasley of Ortonville and Helen Owczarek of North Miami Beach, Fla. The three women belong to Healing Hearts Outreach, a local grassroots, nonprofit organization for helping the poor worldwide.

"It was life-changing," Galiati said, recounting the friendliness of the people she met. "It was just fantastic. They kept saying, 'You are welcome. You are welcome.'"

The trip had some firsts, including being the first time many of the residents had any sort of health care. There was a three-day health clinic. Those who were found to have serious medical problems were sent to a hospital, the nearest one being 150 miles away.

The days were long. Galiati estimates they saw 500 patients but ultimately had to turn hundreds of people away. She said the most common health problems appeared to be skin and eye rashes, and intestinal worms.

"We didn't bring any medications," Galiati said. "We gave our personal medications."

After three weeks, the travelers returned home but haven't forgotten St. Philemon's Academic Center. They have successfully managed to introduce the Internet to the village, making it easier for Philemon to provide guidance.

Efforts are under way to raise money for various needs, including the \$14,000 to \$15,000 needed to bore a well for drinking water.

The fundraising efforts include a Murder Mystery event Feb. 13 at The Masters restaurant in Madison Heights. For more information, contact Healing Hearts Outreach by calling Galiati at 810-338-5941.

This is only the second year for the school. As the current students progress, new grades will be added until the school reaches the equivalent of sixth grade. Philemon is also planning for a high school.

"I don't think I can build a college," he said.

Philemon estimates about up to \$19,000 would be needed to finish the building.