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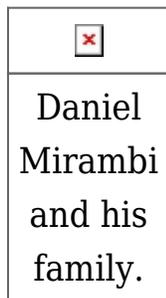
Linguistic duty translates into new home for Congo family

By George Henson

Staff Writer

FORT WORTH—An African refugee family has found a new beginning in Fort Worth, thanks to what at first seemed to be a chance encounter with a group of missionaries.

Daniel Mirambi first met Jason McCoy, assistant minister of music at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, in June 2001. McCoy was on a mission trip with his father, a professor of music at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, who was teaching music to native pastors in Kenya.



Mirambi, a native of the Congo, was introduced to them by a missionary

couple as a guide to a nearby church where his brother-in-law was pastor. While waiting for transportation into town, McCoy asked Mirambi what kind of work he did.

“He laughed softly and said simply, 'I am a refugee,'” McCoy recalled. “He went on to explain that he had obtained a two-week pass to leave the refugee camp in order to visit his sister.”

Mirambi did not fit most Americans' stereotype of a refugee, however. He was well educated and fluent in English. Trained as a telecommunications engineer with the equivalent of bachelor's degree, he lost the ability to work in 1996 as war broke out between the various Congolese tribes, the Rwandans, the Ugandans and eight other neighboring countries.

Mirambi soon went to work as coordinator for three camps of Rwandan refugees, as well as serving as the mediator between a non-profit organization, the government and the United Nations. As the war further escalated, Mirambi and his family of six fled to a village where other family members lived 70 miles away.

It was there that the war caught up with them at last as 70 villagers were killed, including seven family members ranging in age from one month to 73 years.

Mirambi then took his family back to the city where he previously worked as the camp coordinator, this time using his language skills as a guide and translator for several international news agencies. For this, he was three times arrested and accused of being a spy.

He finally fled to Kenya, hoping to keep his family out of a refugee camp. But on July 27, 1997, the entire family was jailed four days before a United Nations agency was able to win their release. The condition of their release, however, was that they move to a refugee camp.

There they stayed for six years, until September. Mirambi's education did allow him to get a job as an administrative assistant, which afforded him e-mail access. He also led Christians of warring tribes to band together to build a church out of mud bricks. But on the whole, life was desolate.

Although he considers himself a Hutu, his mother was Tutsi, so he had to fend off attacks from members of both tribes. Food was meager, school for the children poor or non-existent and sanitary conditions abysmal.

Now, however, the family's present and future are much brighter. Broadway Baptist Church became the Mirambis' sponsoring family as they sought resettlement in Texas as refugees.

Broadway had been told the Mirambis, now numbering seven, would arrive sometime in November. A surprise came in September, however, as the church learned the family would arrive in less than two weeks.

"They caught us a little unprepared," admitted Jorene Swift, minister of congregational care. While North Texas Refugee Services found the Mirambis an apartment, it was up to the church to furnish it.

"We did it in a weekend," Swift said. "Most of the furniture has been used, but none of it is old or ready to be discarded. We really tried not to use anything we wouldn't want in our own homes."

Co-sponsoring a refugee family is something a church of any size could do because the cash outlay is small, Swift said.

"For a church to become involved with a refugee family does not take a lot of financial resources, but time," she explained.

The church was required to provide \$1,000 per member of the refugee family, but only \$200 per person in cash; the remainder came through in-kind gifts such as the furnishings for the home and time spent transporting

or working with the family.

Broadway Baptist Church has a long history of sponsoring refugee families. On prior occasions, the church has sponsored Vietnamese and Cambodian families.

“This has always been a very positive experience for the church,” Swift said.

Kimberly Cooper of North Texas Refugee Services said many times refugee sponsorship is even more positive for smaller churches than larger ones.

“A lot of the smaller churches don't have as many programs competing for people's time, so many times a greater number of people will get personally involved with the refugee family,” she said. “Especially in smaller churches, you see the entire congregation get excited and involved.”

Cooper frequently makes presentations to churches about how they can be involved in refugee resettlement. She may be contacted at (817) 877-5467.

The church's primary responsibility is to help the family become acclimated to their new surroundings, McCoy said.

While the Mirambis had some exposure to Western culture, they knew nothing of child safety seats, seat belts or the electric range and washer and dryer in their new apartment. Those things required demonstrations. Church members also are helping the family learn how to shop in American grocery stores, secure Social Security cards and Daniel Mirambi learn the rules of the road.

While these tasks may appear to be overwhelming, Refugee Services provides each church with a notebook of what needs to be done, where to go to get it done and an outline of the procedure.

The biggest challenge for the Mirambis is to find jobs. The government paid

the family's airfare but must be repaid in a matter of months.

“For many refugees, it destroys their credit rating right off the bat,” Swift said. And for a family of seven, much larger than most refugee families, that amount is huge for a family starting from scratch.

But for now, life is good. The children have been welcomed into their new schools, and they also enjoyed Sunday School and worship at Broadway. They did think more dancing would be good, however.

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