

“Passionate people change the world,” pastor believes

July 7, 2006

Posted: 7/07/06

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By Angela Best

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ARLINGTON—Dennis Wiles believes passionate people change the world. For nine years, he and his family have felt a consuming passion for the people of West Africa—a region stricken by genocide, starvation, disease and tribal warfare.

Wiles, pastor at First Baptist Church in Arlington, described his experiences with missions work in West Africa during a keynote address at the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute’s summer colloquy.

Wiles began working in West Africa in 1997 with his wife, Cindy, who makes the trip at least five times a year.

“Africa is an incredible place. It’s rich with people, with resources—it’s one of my most favorite places in the world. I love to go there. But it’s also one of the most challenging places that I’ve ever been,” Wiles said.

The 22 countries in West Africa have a combined population of about 267 million people. About 18 million belong to the Fulani tribe, a people group First Baptist Church in Arlington has adopted.

More than 99 percent of the Fulani, a semi-nomadic tribe of herdsman in sub-Saharan Niger, are Muslim. While some Muslims not from the region consider the Fulani's version of Islam nontraditional, the Fulani introduced Islam to West Africa and see themselves as the religion's defenders.

"To them, to be Fulani is to be a Muslim," Wiles said.

Most Fulani never have had access to the Christian gospel.

"It's hard for us to believe in the confines of where we live that there are actually people in the world who know nothing about Jesus Christ—who have no clue as to what the Bible says and no grasp of the message of hope that you and I have received," Wiles said. "I have actually met (people) who have never heard of Jesus, and the response that they have given to our teams is, 'Does he live in a village close by?'"

Of the 18 million Fulani people, the teams from First Baptist Church in Arlington who have traveled to West Africa know of fewer than 1,000 believers.

While the challenge of reaching the Fulani remains great, the Arlington Baptists have chosen to face it head-on. The church has purchased medical and dental equipment to take to the villages, acquired a radio station in West Africa that enables them to broadcast the gospel in the Fulani's native language via special radios the teams hand out to village chieftains and made plans to drill a well to provide clean water for villagers.

The church also works with missionaries in the region, providing retreats for them and their families and sending them supplies through a negotiated deal with a shipping company.

"Over the years, what I have noticed—not just in my own ministry, but what I've noticed historically—is that passionate people change the world," Wiles said. "It's people who truly believe in a cause, who truly believe they have

something worth fighting for—that's the kind of people who inspire movements."

And those are the people he and other team members pray God will continue to raise up to help the people in Africa.

"We realize that we can only do so much, but we believe that with the power of God resting upon us and the insight that he has given to us, we can respond to the reality of the suffering of these people, and respond to their spiritual blindness and hopefully bring some hope into that culture and into that environment."

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