

St. Ignatius offers outpouring of support for Nigerian village

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When Deacon Hamilton Okeke was a youngster growing up in the small Nigerian village of Umuogem, obtaining water was no easy task. Long before the sun rose and long before he left for school, the youngster made a two-mile journey to the nearest stream to fetch clean drinking water for his family. After school, he went to a farm to collect firewood for cooking - often enduring the scorching African sun.

"It was difficult," remembered Deacon Okeke, a transitional deacon stationed at St. Ignatius, Hickory, who will be ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Baltimore next year.

"We had to climb a hill very early in the morning and make the trek around 6 a.m.," he said. "The worst was coming back from school in the hot weather."

Deacon Okeke, 32, is hoping to lighten the burden for the people of his village today by constructing a much-needed well at his former parish school, St. Clement Catholic School, located in the Diocese of Awka.

For the first time since his mother's death in 2001, Deacon Okeke will return to Umuogem in early August to work on the project. He will be accompanied by Jim Longenecker, a St. Ignatius parishioner, who will assist for one week. Deacon Okeke will stay for a month.

Thanks to an appeal from Monsignor James Barker, St. Ignatius' pastor, Hickory parishioners have donated nearly \$25,000 to build the well and provide scholarships for children attending St. Clement. Local clergy at St. Ignatius and Sacred Heart, Glyndon, have also donated vestments that will be distributed to fellow clergy in

Nigeria.

The well will cost approximately \$5,000. Money for the scholarships will cover one year's annual tuition and books for each of the 200 students at St. Clement.

Without enough money to conduct formal land surveys, Deacon Okeke said he will rely on divine providence to help him know where best to dig the well.

"We will just pray and say, 'God, this is where we want to dig,'" Deacon Okeke said, "and, we will see what happens."

If the well's construction takes longer than a month, Father Augustine Onyebuchi, head of St. Clement School, will oversee its completion.

Visiting Umuogem, located in the town of Ufuma in the eastern part of the country, will bring a mixture of emotions for Deacon Okeke, he said. He plans to visit the graves of his mother and father as soon as he arrives.

"I wish they were alive to see what God has done in my life," he said.

Longenecker, a driving force behind the project, said Monsignor Barker has been a "real champion of the whole idea" and parishioners have been overwhelmingly generous.

"I was dumbfounded by their support," Longenecker said. "The outpouring touched my heart. I had no idea they would be so generous."

Deacon Okeke noted that most of the people of his village are farmers and many still live in small mud-block houses. They raise animals such as cows, goats and sheep. Parts of the village do not have electricity.

Longenecker "can't wait" to meet the people of the village. He is eager to share the love of the people of St. Ignatius, he said.

"It's going to be an incredible experience," he said.