

# Retired Pastor Leads Campaign to Plant 1,000 Churches in Ethiopia

**Charles Blair said one of the nation's presidents has pledged to donate a piece of land to build a church for every 25 converts**

Charles Blair is no mathematician, but he is a fan of numbers. The former pastor of Calvary Temple in Denver has a particular favorite: 1,850. That's how much he says it costs in dollars to support an Ethiopian missionary for a year, build a church and furnish the congregation with Bibles and discipleship materials.

Another favorite is 25. That's the number of converts needed in order for the government to donate a patch of land for a church building.

Those figures form the crux of a fund-raising effort Blair launched nearly two years ago. Dubbed The Ethiopian Call, the campaign's goal is to raise enough money to plant 1,000 churches in Benishangul-Gumuz, which has a population of 600,000 and is located in western Ethiopia near the Sudan border. So far, Blair says, enough money has been raised to sponsor 649 churches.

Blair said he hopes North American Christians will support the Ethiopian church " and trigger a ripple effect that will be felt throughout all Ethiopia. We believe God's going to give us the nation."

Blair spent more than 50 years as founding pastor of Calvary

Temple before he retired in 1998. In the 1970s, he found himself the subject of newspaper headlines after he unwittingly sold unsecured securities in an effort to raise funds for a retirement center. He was fined and put on probation, and the church went on to repay the investors.

Now, despite retirement, Blair said he doesn't want to miss what he calls an "unprecedented" opportunity to help fulfill the Great Commission. Blair has been working in Ethiopia since the early 1990s, when communism fell in the east African nation. At the invitation of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, a consortium of more than 20 denominations, Blair began training promising young leaders to evangelize their nation and plant churches in remote villages. Blair's organization reports that some 60,000 Ethiopians have converted to Christianity through their efforts.

Blair said the spiritual and social transformation is apparent. Roughly two years ago Yaregal Aysheshim, president of Benishangul-Gumuz, contacted Blair. A Christian, Aysheshim said he noticed a marked difference in the villages in his region: crime was down, the AIDS infection rate had dropped and alcoholism had decreased, Blair recalled.

"He said he'd be in office for 2-1/2 more years, and he wanted to establish 1,000 churches within that time," Blair said. "He was willing to donate a piece of land for every 25 converts. ... We felt it was an open door, one that could close."

Since then, Blair has met quietly with Christian leaders, telling them the story of how he met an African president willing to donate land for building churches. Thousands of dollars have poured in, and more than 100 churches are currently under construction. But Blair said more is needed to

reach the 1,000-church goal by Sept. 1, when Aysheshim's term ends.

Ray Noah, pastor of Valley Christian Center in Dublin, Calif., has led his church in sponsoring 50 Ethiopian church-plants, and he hopes to sponsor 50 more. He visited Ethiopia twice last year, assisting Blair in training the sponsored pastors.

"These pastors ... don't have anything, but what they have is a passion for the Lord," Noah said. "They're very grateful for the resources we bring in, but once you give them that help, they go out there and do the work."

Though Ethiopia is home to the world's oldest Christian community, the residents of Benishangul-Gumuz are largely animists. Many still plow by hand and survive by hunting and fishing. Many don't wear clothing or attend school.

"There's spiritual darkness and with that spiritual darkness is cultural darkness," Noah said. "You can tell where a church has been planted. It not only changes the spiritual life of that community, it changes the cultural and social life of that community."

**Adrienne S. Gaines**

For more information about The Ethiopian Call, contact the Blair Foundation at 877-418-6265; write 2265 Fraser Road, Kawkawlin, MI 48631; or visit .