

# Nurturing a New Congregation...

## FIRST ARABIC PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

### SEEKING REFUGE

The history of Sudan (and South Sudan) over the last century has been one of tremendous violence and suffering. Religious and cultural differences, tribal disagreements, conflicts over oil resources and border disputes have resulted in two devastating civil wars. It is estimated that more than 2 million people were massacred, and thousands of people fled, many walking hundreds of miles to refugee camps where they lived a desperate existence of hunger and poverty.



*Conflict in South Sudan*

### A WELCOME IN DES MOINES

In the early 1990s the United States opened its doors to Sudanese refugees, and Iowa began welcoming them and offering services. Many came to Des Moines and were provided with housing on Kingman Boulevard. The newly arrived refugees – struggling with language, bewildered by culture shock and suffering from post-traumatic stress – made their way to the nearby Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church where they found a welcome refuge and a healing community.



*Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church – where the Sudanese found a “home”*

### THE SUDANESE & COTTAGE GROVE

In 1993 Cottage Grove began its Sudanese ministry, and within two years, the church became known as a “home” for Sudanese refugees, offering worship services and space for a variety of activities. In subsequent years, the Sudanese ministry flourished, yet the Cottage Grove Church lost members and struggled to survive. In 2014 the Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church closed its doors. The Presbytery of Des Moines then sought to create a Mission Center in the Cottage Grove building to support the budding Sudanese congregation, as well as other ministries of the presbytery. However, this endeavor faced insurmountable challenges, and in May of 2016 the Cottage Grove building was sold to another church group.

### NEW BEGINNINGS

Following the sale of the Cottage Grove building, a two-year lease was arranged with the new owners, allowing space for the Sudanese group to hold weekly worship services and other church activities in the building they call “home.” During the summer of 2016, while the building was being renovated, the Sudanese congregation was grateful to be invited to meet at Windsor Presbyterian until renovations were completed in late August. On September 11 the Sudanese



*Pastor Ekram Kachu (CRE)*

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congregation celebrated their return to the Cottage Grove building with a joyous worship service that included guests from the presbytery and the new Cottage Grove Church. Over 100 people were in attendance.

## **A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY**

With the support of the PCUSA's 1001 Worshipping Communities project, the Sudanese congregation is now organized as the First Arabic Presbyterian

Worshipping Community, with Ekram Kachu (CRE) serving as pastor. The congregation meets weekly for worship on Sunday afternoons and hosts weddings, funerals and other social gatherings. Also offered are Arabic classes for the children of Sudanese refugees and assistance for parents as they seek to understand American culture. In partnership with Drake University, First Arabic will soon offer after-school tutoring services to Sudanese students, following a very successful pilot project last spring.



*First Arabic returns to the Cottage Grove building for worship on Sept. 11, 2016.*

## **ECUMENICAL OUTREACH**

Participation in these activities is not limited to church members alone – the whole Sudanese community, including Sudanese Muslims, are welcome and encouraged to participate. Pastor Ekram spends much of her time making pastoral calls on Sudanese Christians and Muslims alike, sharing the love of God with all, regardless of religious or tribal affiliations. Following this summer's renewed violence in Sudan, she has been bringing a message of healing, reconciliation and hope to the Sudanese community as they cope with the devastating news from their homeland. And as a female pastor, she serves as a role model to young women in the Sudanese community, and beyond.



*Children of refugees attend Arabic language classes at Cottage Grove.*

## **SUPPORT FOR THE JOURNEY**

The Sudanese Support Team, which is seeking to be recognized as an official committee of the Presbytery, was organized in the spring of 2016. The group is working along side the Sudanese congregation to help them learn about all aspects of church life, including worship, the sacraments, mission/outreach, Christian education, polity, finances, organizational structure, leadership development, stewardship, and communications. The team has helped secure and install a computer for the congregation, and a member database has been set up. They are working to secure financial resources, with the ultimate goal of First Arabic becoming a self-sufficient congregation, and an official PCUSA church. Against a backdrop of our denomination's declining numbers, helping to grow a new congregation – especially one whose members have endured such pain and hardship – can be a life-giving endeavor with revitalizing benefits for us all. Let us continue this journey together with hope and joy!