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Q: Before founding Orphan Outreach you served 22 years – the last 12 years as vice president of Buckner Orphan Care International with Buckner International. What made you passionate about this work?

A: I actually started my work with children in 1973 working with severely emotionally disturbed teenagers and have had the privilege to work both in a public and private context for 36 years. Two of the great privileges of my ministry life were to be involved in starting the international ministry for Buckner and now to be involved in starting Orphan Outreach. I have always had a burden for orphans and vulnerable children. Those who are committed to orphan ministry can understand that the desire to serve orphans is driven by the Lord's love for these children. I am convinced he leads Christians where he wants to serve and to the children He wants us to minister to. It has been so clear over the years how divine appointments have led me to a specific place and individual children. It is ministry that completes us as Christians. I think James says it well when he says that faith without works is dead. As Christians we are compelled to live out the love of our Lord and it is very clear He loves the orphan uniquely.

Q: Why do you think Christians feel such a draw to care for orphans? We have talked before about the connection between orphans and widows in the Bible. Why do you think there is a command to care for both in the same way?

A: As Christians we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and therefore share the heart and desire of God the Father. That is the

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reason we are drawn to the ministry to care for orphans. When we are in fellowship with Him, His desires become our desires. In the bible the Lord commands Israel and the church to care for orphans and widows. In fact most of the judgments against Israel involved their lack of care of widows, orphans and the poor as evidence of their unfaithfulness to Him. The bible defines an orphan as a child who has lost their father hence orphans are called “fatherless.” The bible usually talks about orphans in the context of “widows and orphans.” The reason is that in Old and New Testament times, if a child lost their father it usually would make the family destitute since the father was the primary source of income for the family. Most of the 132 million orphans in the world have at least one parent living and usually that is the mother. UNICEF’s definition of orphan is a child who has lost one or both parents. Often this is a father. In most of the world the loss of a father causes the family to spiral into extreme poverty.

There are two significant misconceptions about orphans: First that most orphans live in orphanages and second that orphans have lost both parents. The vast majority of orphans has at least one parent and do not live in orphanages. For the first time in history the majority of the world’s population lives in cities and of all the people that live in cities, one-third live in slums. Impoverished areas are where the majority of orphans live.

One of the elementary girls we serve in Honduras is from a family who live in Nueva Suyapa, one of the worst slum areas of Tegucigalpa. Her mother is the head of household and had prayed and prayed that her child would not have to live in poverty and wanted desperately for Anna to get a good education. Anna is now in a Christian private school that Orphan Outreach supports and last year made the honor role. Her mother’s faith and love for her children was blessed by the Lord and He made provision for her. I think about her prayers and how the Lord led us to that school and to help this family in particular. I see the hand of

the Lord using Orphan Outreach and our supporters to reach into a slum most have not heard of and to a family living in the worst of conditions because of His intense love for these children.

Q: Where do you think Christians have experienced the greatest success in caring for orphans and vulnerable children?

A: Historically Christians have been the driving force in orphan care. Most of the private children’s homes around the world have been the work of Christians. I think that heritage in some ways has complicated the current efforts in caring for children. Most large residential programs in the west have been significantly reduced in favor of less restrictive approaches such as foster care, family care and preventive programs that try to preserve family unity and eliminate the need for the child being removed. The mental picture of setting up large orphanages is still in the Christian mind-set as the best way to serve orphans.

There is a need for residential care but it should not be the primary way we care for orphans. It is so impressive to see the work of Christian agencies in foster care, adoption, Christian education in impoverished areas, family intervention and support programs. Most of the leadership in Africa will emphasize that they do not want orphanages but community-based solutions to address the needs of orphans.

In Latvia, I was involved in consulting and supporting their foster care initiative and it was amazing to see the insight that the government officials had for their children and how they wanted to move to community-based care. Two of the keys of officials were very committed Christians who were working to get the church engaged in that process. There are a lot of Christian ministries doing great work all around the world. The greatest need is training in best practices and a dialogue among the many groups doing childcare to make sure the work we are doing is in the best interest of the children we serve.

Q: You hosted a workshop at the 2008 Christian Alliance for Orphans Conference for individuals interested in opening an orphanage. Can you summarize your advice for the readers of this journal?

A: As I mentioned, residential programs are needed for children that cannot be served in less restricted care. I have visited many orphanages around the world and developed a list of 10 important concepts to consider in developing a residential program.

1. It is important to develop a philosophy of care in order to build a cohesive orphan program.

2. Before you develop an orphan care program, it is crucial to develop a strategic plan.

3. Quality of care is in direct proportion to the quality of staff hired to manage and care for the children.

4. Training of staff is a critical component to quality of care and safety of the children. This aspect of childcare is much neglected internationally and is crucial for quality of care.

5. Multiple layers of supervision are crucial to consistency of care and safety of children. This involves developing a good management team, case managers and childcare staff. The three layers of staff provide a check and balance in the care for children and provide a safe environment.

6. Intake criteria are a crucial component to make sure a program design meets the needs of the children in care. The criteria must be developed that is consistent with the program design and capabilities. Programs that take children they are not equipped to serve run the risk of significantly compromising the entire program.

7. Permanency planning is an important component to ensure that you meet the needs of the children you serve. All children need to have a plan of care that moves a child from the crisis situation that created the need for care to living either in a family setting or independence.

8. It is crucial that the educational program be developed to meet the wide range of needs of the children you serve. Programs must equip children to be able to live independently, which means providing a quality education.

9. The number of children to be served at one campus or if developing a foster care program, the case manager-to-child ratio, needs to be determined. There are different types of residential care. A group home ideally would have about eight to 10 children. A residential campus ideally would have about 40 to 60 children. In relation to foster care it is best to have no more than a one to 10 case management to child ratio for therapeutic children and no more than one to 20 for non-therapeutic children.

10. It is crucial to develop a deliberate, cultural and age appropriate strategy to disciple the children in their relationship with Christ. This is an opportunity to involve the local church to provide spiritual mentors for the children.

Q: You visit orphan care projects all over the world each year. Can you describe a best practice that you have seen?

A: I have seen so many good programs it is hard to describe just one that symbolizes best practice. Orphan Outreach is involved in a program run by Mrs. Arzu who is the former First Lady in Guatemala. Her husband is now mayor of Guatemala City and she is very involved in caring for vulnerable children in the city. She is a very committed Christian and has her own foundation. Her foundation is running three schools for street children in Guatemala City and is doing an exceptional job. She believes the children she serves deserve a quality Christian education and has provided a holistic program that involves not only education but case management services, medical and other interventions to help these most vulnerable of the children in the city.

In India, we are supporting a group home for HIV/AIDS children. It is founded and managed by a very committed Chris-

tian physician who started it because of her experience in a health clinic. She walked into the clinic and saw a boy on a cot laying be himself and inquired to why no one was helping him. No one had



attended to his needs because he had AIDS. Dr. Edwards went over to help and found the boy was dead. He had been lying there and no one knew he had died. She felt that children with HIV/AIDS were so stigmatized she wanted to provide an environment where they could be cared for without prejudice and with love.

Since our involvement we have experienced the death of three children whom we served—all had become Christians and had a tender relationship with Christ. It has been heartbreaking but also inspiring to see how the Lord has used this program to not only minister to the children but to change the lives of the families.

Q: What do orphans and vulnerable children need us to know about them and their needs? If you could speak for them, what would they say to our readers who want to help but might not know how?

A: I had an experience lately that touched my heart and reminded me of what orphan ministry is all about. I had got to know a 9-year-old girl in an orphanage in Vladimir Russia. I had been to her orphanage and it was one of the times I just got to hang around and play with children. Natasha was one of the kids that just connected with me. Every time I came to the orphanage, I would get to spend some time with her and we got to know each other well. I lost contact with her as time went on because our work in that region had been completed. I had not

seen her for eight or nine years and I recently visited that region and asked one of the staff working in the region if she knew where she was. She said yes she is in one of our transitional homes. I asked if we could visit and fortunately

it was close to where we were going. I went up to the apartment and as soon as I saw her she came up and gave me a big hug. I was looking at some bookshelves in their living area and noticed she had a picture of her and me on the bookshelf. Despite not seeing her for that long period of time, it was clear that the friendship we had made a lasting impact.

Many orphans have told me they love me but what they really want to say is “will you love me?” We all want to be uniquely loved and valued. Orphans have experienced tremendous rejection and tragedy. Another orphan told me once that she had been abandoned by everyone. Her mother had been murdered and she never knew her father. She was really telling me not to abandon her and her sisters. Ten years later, a few months ago, I was with these girls and we were riding to a restaurant and spontaneously they said, “Thank you for not leaving us.” It reminds me of what the Lord said, “I will not leave you as orphans...”

The definition of pure and undefiled religion in James 1:27 finds at its core ministering to widows and orphans in their distress. Love is at the center of that definition and love involves not only emotion but action and commitment. Kids need someone who will love them and show that love by caring for their needs. Real love is demonstrated by action and by what we do, not what we say or what we feel. I think orphans are saying to us, “Will you love me?”—in the truest meaning of love.