



## The call to action: Lessons learned

### *How churches are making a difference for orphans and vulnerable children in Africa*

*Editor's Note: This essay is based on a workshop that was presented as part of the Barbara Chafin Lectureship at The Next Big Idea, a conference for church leaders held at Baylor University in February 2009. It builds on the theme of this special issue of the journal, yet gives more practical examples and insights of what these themes might mean for your congregation.*

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She is approximately 5 years old. She lost both her parents to AIDS and had not been given a name, so the staff at the Day Care Center call her Pinky because of the little pink cap she often wears. Sometimes Pinky stays in neighborhood homes, but she spends most of her time hiding in a cracked drain in nearby bushes. A guardian family awaits Pinky but she runs away whenever social workers approach her, as she does not trust adults. "Please pray," writes our African friend, "that Pinky will soon be with the loving family God has provided for her."

In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 40 million children are orphaned, having lost one or both parents due to disease, HIV/AIDS, war, and other causes. More than 80% of the children orphaned by HIV/AIDS globally live in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than half the population is living on the equivalent of \$1 (U.S.) a day. For every child that has been orphaned, many more are made vulnerable as increasing numbers of parents become ill and suffer

the loss of resources needed to feed, clothe, shelter and pay school fees for the children in their care.

The vast majority of children orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS and other causes remain in family care—where children grow best. These children are living with their surviving parent, grandparents, extended family and friends in the community—like the family waiting to care for Pinky. Unfortunately, many of these families are living in extreme poverty, struggling to provide for the most basic of necessities.

### **BIBLICAL MANDATE**

For Christians, the biblical mandate to actively respond to the needs of the poor, the orphaned, the widowed is clear. In recent years, there has been a surge of goodwill and interest on the part of U.S. churches seeking to address the “orphan crisis” in Africa. What is not always clear is how to respond in ways that best meet the needs of children.

Biblical example, modern-day policy and research, and just plain common sense are all in alignment on the critical importance of the love and care of family in the life of a child. Therefore, the best intervention on behalf of orphans and vulnerable children is intervention that supports the efforts of guardian families. Orphanages may sometimes be needed, as when children are abandoned, abused, and without family members or friends who can take them in. However, these placements should be a temporary transition to more stable family care whenever possible. Strengthening family and community care remains the best way to meet the needs of children. The challenge for Christians is how to support this “best practice,” especially from a distance and when building orphanages has historically been the most common overseas response. How does a church based in the United States, for example, build an orphan care ministry in Africa true to the principle of family-based care?

The good news is there are many resources from which to draw. For the more academically inclined or evidence-driven, there is a long and steadily growing body of research demonstrating the importance of family and the limitations of long-term institutional care with respect to children’s overall development, social skills, and prospects for independent life as adults. There is also the field experience of well-established non-governmental organizations that can serve as guides or as intermediaries to those who want to get involved.

Perhaps most important of all are the thousands of African faith-based initiatives that are directly serving orphans and vulnerable children in their communities. Often led by local churches, these initiatives are more sustainable and effective than those started from the outside, because they are community owned and community driven. These initiatives mobilize local resources to address local problems, bringing church members and neighbors together to help build the family and community response to meet the needs of children.

### **RIGHT MOTIVES, POOR RESULTS**

The Willow Creek Association found that churches that had not previously responded to the needs of African orphans and vulnerable children, but were motivated to respond, most often wanted to start with one of the four ideas listed below. Although each of these ideas flows from right motives, they each have a high potential for going wrong.

1) Many leaders want to help fund an orphanage. As mentioned previously, this has traditionally been the option of choice. Donors like to fund something that is concrete, definable, measurable, visible, and provides them a place to visit: hence, a building. When good-hearted people hear about the extraordinary need in Africa, it’s not uncommon for them to want to do something big and dramatic. What would make better sense, therefore, than a large

orphanage where hundreds of children can be lovingly cared for? But in reality, orphanages are contrary to traditional African culture, they're far more expensive than family-centered care, and as mentioned earlier, they are not the best option for the developmental needs of children.

2) Many want to send short-term serving teams. The desire to offer one's time, money, and compassion to people in desperate need is, of course, admirable. In the context of an ongoing global partnership, in which there is a long-term strategy, honest communication and authentic relationships, serving teams can be mutually beneficial, transforming the church and community on the field as well as the people who cross oceans and cultures in order to serve. However, without that context of ongoing partnership, sending large groups of people who want to "help the poor people" or "take care of orphans" is often far more beneficial for the people "serving" than for the people "served." It may provide a useful vision trip for Americans, but all too often it hinders more than it helps local ministries.

3) Church mission groups want to send missionaries to the affected areas. Often this is the only paradigm of global engagement they know. So, they raise financial support to transplant a young American family to a faraway village where they will have to spend five years learning the language, building relationships, and trying to understand the culture well enough to even begin constructive engagement. All the while, there are local church leaders or local faith-based NGOs that are doing the best they can with very limited resources. Had the American church invested those five years in identifying and serving local leaders who already knew the language, culture, needs and potential solutions, the community would probably have been far better served. Although there are some situations where there are no local churches or faith-based options, that is not

the case in most areas of Africa.

4) They want to build schools or medical clinics, dig wells, or fund other projects to help under-resourced communities. If the proposed project truly is locally conceived and embraced, this may be a great option. However, the history of foreign investment in Africa is littered with sad stories that violate that principle. Consider just three examples.

- It is well known that inexpensive bed nets can radically decrease malaria infections, so celebrities have raised millions of dollars to provide thousands of bed nets. But many of the nets sit in storage, unused, because it's a lot easier to fund them than it is to get them into the rural villages where they're so desperately needed. A big idea is useless unless it's paired with a trusted, on-the-ground distribution system.

- As they become increasingly aware of the unnecessary tragedy of water-borne diseases, well-meaning people and organizations are funding sophisticated wells in thousands of poor villages. But five years later the wells are unusable because the people who built them are long gone and nobody in the village knows how to maintain them. Pure water systems are vital; thank God for the many Christian organizations designing and funding water systems appropriate to local needs. But unless a water project is embraced, constructed, and maintained locally, it will probably not provide a long-term solution.

- A state-of-the-art school is built to bring education to an isolated community. Nobody bothered to find out that what was really needed was adequate housing for teachers. Now the community has a lovely school, but they still can't lure a teacher to their town.

Stories like this are more the rule than the exception. They highlight the first three rules of cross-cultural engagement: Listen. Listen. Listen.

Obviously, good intentions are not enough; we must proceed slowly, carefully

and wisely, honoring proven principles of cross-cultural partnership. On the other hand, we can't forget the urgency of the situation. When Willow Creek Community Church became intentional about getting involved with the AIDS pandemic in Africa, staff and volunteers attended a conference to explore various avenues of engagement. At the conference a Ugandan woman said, "I think it's great that you leaders are so committed to learning, understanding, and doing the right thing. But all the time you're talking and planning, our people are dying." Conference attendees needed that jolt of reality to move from talking to action.

## CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

Here are four suggestions for church engagement:

1) Plan and work toward a one-time fundraiser. October and November are perfect months to focus a congregation's attention on orphan care and other issues related to AIDS, culminating in a special offering the first weekend of December (World AIDS Day is December 1). Several years ago a dozen churches in a small Michigan community decided to try to raise \$1 million to support several creditable organizations caring for widows and orphans in Africa. Throughout the fall, each church used the same educational components, including videos and Biblical teaching, then they came together for a joint service to take the special offering. Even though they didn't hit their dollar mark, they did raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to pour into life-saving action on the front lines of the battle in Africa. Most of these Michigan churches are in the midst of working out their long-term strategy for engagement in Africa, but this one-time fund-raiser gave them the opportunity to

raise awareness in their congregations and also to begin making a difference in Africa, while they develop their long-range strategy.

2) Build on existing global relationships. A small Canadian church had a long-term relationship with a Christian school in Uganda. When church leaders became con-



victed that they needed to respond more aggressively to the AIDS pandemic, they met with their trusted friends at the Ugandan school and discovered that school leaders had many ideas for ministering to orphans in the community; in fact, they had already begun doing so, but they lacked the funding to expand their work. As the Canadian church leaders and the local school leaders began to work together, they were able to coalesce a broad network of local services for children and families in that community. Because the Canadians built on a relationship they already had, where there was a high level of trust and communication, they were able to move forward far more quickly than if they had started out with a new partner. Most churches do have some kind of global partnerships. Before pursuing new partnerships, it may be wise to investigate the potential for expanding or reshaping existing relationships to address the local needs of vulnerable children.

3) Establish a long-term, church-wide

partnership with a trusted NGO. Some years ago the pastor of a large church on the east coast attended a meeting sponsored by World Vision. This pastor's heart was broken by the stories he heard about the plight of children in countries hard-hit by AIDS. As a result he began teaching his congregation about God's heart of compassion for vulnerable children and challenged individuals to become the hands and feet of Christ. Today his congregation sponsors thousands of children in one African community where World Vision guarantees food, medical care, education and hope for orphaned and vulnerable children and the families that care for them.

As part of their long-term investment in this community, church staff and lay leaders periodically visit the village, offering friendship, prayer, and practical help to local World Vision staff and community leaders. Because the entire local church is focused on one geographical region, everyone in the church, from grade school kids to seniors, knows about "our kids in our village." This global partnership has become a central part of the ethos of a church that had previously been focused almost entirely on the needs of its own congregation.

4) Develop direct local church partnerships. When Willow Creek Community Church felt compelled by God to address the AIDS crisis in Africa, an ad hoc committee of volunteers joined together to read, study, attend conferences, meet with HIV/AIDS experts, and visit African churches and local NGOs focused on HIV/AIDS response. The study group discovered that HIV/AIDS is a complex issue requiring a multifaceted response, including:

- Care for the sick with support groups, medication, and home-based care.
- Support for orphans, widows, and

families — food programs, educational support, job training.

- Prevention — testing, counseling, youth programs, life skills education.
- General community development — to alleviate poverty and disease.

Members of the study group were overwhelmed by the complexity and scope of the need, but they also were awed and humbled by the amazing ministries of heroic African churches that were actively engaged in the various necessary interventions listed above. These African church leaders and volunteers were doing wonderful work, but against such great odds. In too many cases it was the poor

caring for the desperately poor, the sick caring for the dying. The cultural understanding, the willingness, the faith, and the hard work were already there; what was needed was encouragement, prayer support, and additional funding. So Willow ([willowcreek.org/global](http://willowcreek.org/global)) began partnering with some of these local church leaders in South Africa and Zambia. Later, as Willow's relationships in Africa grew, they began partnering in Angola, Malawi, and most recently in Ethiopia.

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**PARTNERING, NOT ORIGINATING**

Willow Creek doesn't start new programs in any of those countries. They identify local churches or networks of churches with strong leaders who have already taken the initiative to begin serving holistically in their community. In the context of an ongoing relationship, leaders from the local African church and from Willow work together to strengthen and expand the work of the local ministry.

In South Africa, Willow partners directly with more than 20 individual churches. Each church ministry looks different, based on the specific needs of the community as well as on the gifts and passion God has



placed in members of the congregation. One church, with many medical personnel in its membership, started a hospice; with loving care, many of these patients “who had been given up on” become well enough to receive ARV medications and return home to care for their children. Another church, started by a former youth pastor, provides youth clubs and character-based life skills training to help vulnerable kids make healthy, safe life choices. A church started by a pastor whose sister died of AIDS offers HIV testing right in the church building and challenges everyone in the community to find out their status, so they can receive the support and medications they need.

In Malawi, World Relief provided Willow Creek with a connection to hundreds of churches in the poorest region of the country. This partnership started with a child survival program that trains volunteers in local churches who in turn offer mothers in rural areas basic training in child health. As the relationship developed, local leaders expressed the need for new wells, care for patients with HIV/AIDS, and Bibles and other resources for local pastors. The needs expressed by local leaders continue to shape the partnership.

In a poor, rural village in Zambia, 22 local churches, crossing all denominations, joined together to care for more than 1,000 orphans in their community. Through partnership with Willow, these churches not only subsidize guardian families, but also teach sustainable farming techniques, establish income-generating projects, help train local school teachers, and have established a local medical clinic.

Walking with local leaders like these, who are serving faithfully on the front lines of the battle against extreme poverty and disease, is heart-wrenching, inspiring, and humbling. We have learned above all to become constant learners, continually seeking a deeper understanding of the context in which we hope to partner. Learning from the experiences of other U.S. churches,

groups and NGOs is essential, but it is also crucial to connect directly with the field. Go on a learning tour. Identify local resource people. LISTEN.

The second major lesson we have learned is to respect local leadership. The most sustainable responses are those that have a high level of community participation and ownership. Be responsive to local priorities and needs. Start small, build over time. Be sensitive to the absorptive capacity of the on-the-field partner: offering too much too fast can undermine local efforts. LOCAL LEADERS must lead the way.

The third major lesson we have learned is that a true partnership is built on healthy relationships. Honest, but respectful conversation. And for those whose faith drives their action, partnership in prayer. If you find yourself more concerned about fulfilling your agenda than discerning the God-given DREAMS OF YOUR PARTNER, then you may not be ready to walk alongside one of God’s heroes on the field. Ask for God to humble you and to open your heart and mind fully to the work God is doing around the world on behalf of his children.

There are many ways to make a lasting difference for children orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS and poverty. As Christians our action is most powerful when it is grounded in deep faith in a loving God, fueled by a passion for justice, sustained by a consuming commitment to Christ’s redemptive purposes, and informed by best practice. In this way we can be Jesus’ hands and feet, acting and moving and bringing healing to a wounded world.

## RESOURCES

- **Better Care Network** – [www.crin.org/bcn/](http://www.crin.org/bcn/)
- **Faith to Action: Strengthening Family and Community Care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in sub-Saharan Africa** (copies available for download and order from: [www.faithbasedcarefororphans.org](http://www.faithbasedcarefororphans.org))