



## The Forsaken Children in Ethiopia

**PROGRAMS:** Children's Home Ethiopia (CHE) and Kota Ganate Agriculture Project

**LOCATION:** Addis Ababa and Chencha, Ethiopia

**CHILDREN SERVED:** 80 in school, 20 at drop-in center, 2 in foster care

I was surrounded by children – a small hand reaching for mine, shy smiles as younger children eased closer to me, laughter as I joined in a jump rope session. As coordinator of the Better Care Network's Faith to Action Initiative, I recently visited several orphan care projects in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Like many who advocate for children, I chose to make a difference from a distance – but that doesn't mean I don't crave the more personal interaction. These moments with children always remind me of the gifts of hope and resiliency God has instilled in the heart of children. It is that hope — hope for home, family and a sense of belonging at the heart of every child — that The Forsaken Children ministry models in its programs.

In 2004 two Americans, Joe Bridges and Mike Granger, traveled to Ethiopia to participate in YWAM (Youth With A Mission) training. The overwhelming number of children living, begging, and eating in the streets of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city, shocked them. They had not originally planned to build a street child ministry but separately each heard God's voice suggesting a change in plans.

During their three months in Ethiopia, Joe and Mike developed a friendship with their guide and translator, Nega Meaza, a Christian Ethiopian who had long been concerned for the children of his country but had limited resources to start a project of his own. One night, as Joe and Mike prepared to return home, the three men sat together and



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each shared his vision for ministry to the street children of Ethiopia. They found that God had given them a shared vision. This was the first meeting of The Forsaken Children, a ministry that would ultimately bring together partners from the United States to support more than 100 children through holistic care and ministry.

Mike, Joe and Nega remained in contact over the next year and devoted time to prayer, learning and preparation. Mike and Joe entered this endeavor knowing very little about the circumstances that bring children into the streets. Unfortunately there are complex factors working behind the scenes wherever a significant population of street children is present. Some children have been sent to the city to live with relatives or to work and have ended up in exploitative labor conditions. Some children have run away from their homes due to neglect or abuse. Others prefer life on the street and have become addicted to street behavior such as using drugs. Many street children beg or play in the street because they have no money for school, but return home to family each night. Not all street children are orphans and not all orphans are street children.

The issues are many and while Mike and Joe originally returned home to the United States to raise funds for a project, possibly an orphanage, they soon realized that this would not be a comprehensive solution nor would it impact enough children and families.

The components of the project in Ethiopia developed slowly as Nega moved to Addis Ababa from his rural hometown to study community development. He started visiting children in the street, playing with them, bringing food, and learning through building relationships with the children, their friends and family. Through Nega's knowledge and experience, the three men came to understand that most of the street children of Addis Ababa had family they loved and worried about, they had community,

and they had developed resources and skills that required a unique and multifaceted intervention. Children's Home Ethiopia was born of this realization and its first project was a Christian drop-in center.

Back in the United States, Joe and Mike gathered friends and family, including Joe's wife, Karyn, to create a small faith-based organization that they called The Forsaken Children, which could provide direction, oversight, and fundraising for Children's Home Ethiopia. The government of Ethiopia is very supportive of child sponsorship programs. Working within that framework, The Forsaken Children began a sponsorship program connecting churches and individuals in the States with individual "street children" in Ethiopia. It was a simple concept, just \$30 per month per child provided enough support to Children's Home Ethiopia that they were able to begin enrolling sponsored children in their two projects.

These days Children's Home Ethiopia is a very busy organization. Their first project is the Street Child Drop-in Center located in the center of Addis Ababa near Merkato, the largest market in East Africa. Many children living near the Merkato beg from tourists and some are the sole breadwinners for their family. Many of the children spend their days in the street and return at night to a plastic shelter resembling a very rudimentary tent. They are at high risk of exploitation and abuse on the street and very few will ever be able to afford \$10/month for school fees. But the home and family they do have is very important to them. The drop-in center provides a safe place for these children to spend their days and staff encourage, act as role models, and regularly connect with the children's families. The drop-in center provides meals, Bible lessons, English lessons, a shower each week, and loving playtime for the children. The goal is to prepare each child for formal school and to ensure that every one

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of them has a safe place to sleep at night either with biological family or a foster family.

The second level of Children's Home Ethiopia is a street child prevention and education project. The Safe Child Project uses donations to sponsor 80 children by paying their school fees and providing school supplies. These 80 children are subsidized in 14 schools across the city. All 80 are invited to come to the center on Saturdays where they receive Bible and Amharic (language spoken by the majority of Ethiopians in Addis Ababa) lessons. Each family is visited on a regular basis in the home to ensure that the children are taken care of and not at risk of abandonment or abuse.

Children's Home Ethiopia carefully monitors the situation of each child in their programs. They recognize that while most of these street children lack tangible assets, they value their siblings, family, and their stories. These are their assets in life. All programs are designed to keep children in their family or connect them with a foster family home in their community.

In order to achieve this, the ministry plans to expand their services soon to include a formal foster care program. They already have placed two of the drop-in center teenagers who have no family in the city into informal foster homes. With increased funding, they plan to create a transitional home where others who are ready for family life can live and prepare while foster homes are identified or extended family is contacted.

The final planned component of Children's Home Ethiopia is a street child prevention



project, Kota Ganate Agriculture, which will address the source of many street children in Addis Ababa. When Nega began building relationships with children living on the street he realized that many of the most vulnerable children, without ties to family in the city, had come from a rural area in the southern part of Ethiopia, near his own hometown. The Kota Ganate project will begin this year with the purpose of introducing higher-yield agriculture techniques in southern communities in this area in order to

improve food security and economic conditions. The goal is to assist these subsistence farmers so that they will have a surplus of crops to sell and therefore less incentive to send their children to the city to make money. The project will also produce some income to help improve Children's Home Ethiopia's prospects for self-sufficiency.

The Forsaken Children and Children's Home Ethiopia have had many bumps in the road and as I spent time with Nega, Joe and both of their extended family members, I admired their honest sharing of lessons learned. Although many well-intentioned Christians in the United States want to start orphan care ministries in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in response to interacting with street children, these men advise caution and patience. From experience they know that you cannot solve all problems or provide everything all at once for street children. Building relationships, learning the true reason for their situation, and creating trust with each child and his/her family is necessary for a sustainable program. Many organizations fail in the first two years so it is important to build slowly, accept

that some mistakes will be made and learn from them.

The Forsaken Children is just one small example of an excellent small holistic ministry to orphans and vulnerable children. But there are hundreds more in Addis Ababa alone. These smaller groups are often overlooked and underfunded by donors in the United States but it is these groups that are most closely in touch with and able to meet the needs of the surrounding

community. Each individual contribution, volunteer, or letter of encouragement can make a huge difference to small orphan and childcare ministries like The Forsaken Children.

A home, a family, being valued — every child should have these, and it is possible, even in our world of great need. It is as real as a small, sun-warmed hand reaching up to take my hand.

## Who are Orphans and Vulnerable Children?

The orphan of the Bible is a child who has lost a father. UNICEF and other international organizations use a very similar definition. An orphan is a child who has lost one parent (single orphan) or both parents (double orphan). Of the more than 132 million children classified as orphans worldwide, only 13 million have actually lost both parents. Evidence shows that the vast majority of “orphans” are living with a surviving parent, grandparent, or family member.

Vulnerable children are those children who are determined by their community to be in greatest need. The term “orphans and vulnerable children” or OVC, is often used to describe children who have lost one or both parents, whose parents have become too ill to care for and protect them, children living in extreme poverty, or those suffering from illness or disability. It is important that programs address both orphans and vulnerable children together. When programs target, for example, “AIDS orphans” only, they create problems by both privileging and stigmatizing the children receiving assistance.

## 12 Strategies for Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children

These strategies are based on principles that have been agreed upon and endorsed by a broad constituency of community and faith-based organizations, foundations, and international agencies serving children. They serve as a guide to “best practice” for those who are funding or implementing responses to children in need.

1. Focus on the most vulnerable children, not only those orphaned by HIV/AIDS.
2. Strengthen the capacity of families and communities to care for children.
3. Reduce stigma and discrimination.
4. Support HIV prevention and awareness, particularly among youth.
5. Strengthen the ability of caregivers and youth to earn livelihoods.
6. Provide material assistance to those who are too old or ill to work.
7. Ensure access to health care, life-saving medications, and home-based care.
8. Provide day care and other support services that ease the burden on caregivers.
9. Support schools and ensure access to education, for girls as well as boys.
10. Support the psychosocial, as well as material, needs of children.
11. Engage children and youth in the decisions that affect their lives.
12. Protect children from abuse, gender discriminations, and labor exploitation.