

At issue: the welfare of children globally

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We have all been touched by the life of a child in need. Perhaps in a late night infomercial or a solemn appeal tucked in a stack of mail, this life (for minutes, seconds even) may have been thrust into your consciousness. We glimpse the gnawing desperation of the child's cause, the utter desolation of the child's surroundings and the impossible reality that there are so many more children just like this one. We watch, read or listen to a narrator plead for our compassion, it is difficult to turn away and we begin to wrestle with our conscience.

We may cry out, "Why Lord?" in anger at the injustice meted out against innocent children or quietly wipe a tear as we consider hunger, homelessness and abandonment in the most desperate places on earth. We may see the dark alley brimming with sewage, the isolated hut or makeshift shack in the corner of a slum or perhaps it is the vacant look on the child's face as she lays motionless in her mother's arms. Some of us may succumb to a nagging guilt; others of us may hold up a shield of skepticism and simply turn away with a heart hardened to an unknown suffering. In every instance, however, we will make a decision.

Those of us privileged to go "over there," to a developing country to study, on a missions trip or in our vocations will witness firsthand, to varying degrees, the debilitating poverty. The journey may likely begin with throngs of street children thrusting their hands and arms into the window of your taxi as you are whisked away from the airport and it may unfold as you walk the streets or shantytowns with your host, visit a children's home or hospital. Undoubtedly, you will end the journey with experiences that flesh out the initial impressions of these vulnerable children and add dimensions to your understanding of the problem.

We may return moved, challenged and transformed by these experiences and share our stories from the field. We may have to sift through the admiring comments of family and friends. Chagrined by the accolades, we try our best to explain that we received far more from these children than we felt we were able to give, that our hardships in service were fleeting. That unlike the children we served, hunger and illness did not loom over us as an ever-present cloud. If our safety was threatened, we could seek refuge in the home of our host or our embassy; we had a blue passport and airline tickets to escape it all.

I have spent more than 10 years working on behalf of AIDS

affected and vulnerable children in the developing world. I have scores of experiences that have left an imprint: the grandmother in Zambia whom I met caring for 13 orphaned grand- and great-grandchildren because all of her children had died of AIDS; the young woman in Kenya who dropped out of university to care for a group of orphaned children who had been abandoned by their caregiver; and the child in Tanzania, the same age as my toddler son, who slept quietly in his bed at a hospice for HIV-infected children. I have grappled with anger, guilt, frustration and even at times a regrettable indifference to suffering as a mechanism to rationalize extreme disparities in wealth.

In all of this, whether we have had the opportunity to travel to see and understand the lives of the world's most vulnerable children or not, we must contend with the reality of our limitations. It seems there is only so much that we can do. But the biblical imperative is clear and direct, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22) and further, we are called to "look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27) in striving toward a pure and faultless religion.

This Summer/Fall issue of the Journal is about *doing* on behalf of children in need globally. The focus is on highly vulnerable children, including children without family care – highlighting the grassroots and community-based interventions that stand in the gap. It contains a rich and diverse collection of voices to shed light on how families and communities are responding to the needs of vulnerable children. **Geoff Foster**, an authority on the role of churches and faith-based organizations in caring for vulnerable children in sub Saharan Africa, offers an historical perspective on the influence of religious institutions in child welfare reform, urging churches to move beyond service provision to greater involvement in policy formation and advocacy on

behalf of children. **Stephen Hammer, Aaron Greenberg, and Ghazal Keshavarzian** of UNICEF affirm the key role of religious communities in supporting children at the family and community level. They remind us that while on the front lines in caring for the vulnerable, religious organizations have promoted interventions that undermine family-based solutions and result in unintended negative consequences on the welfare of children. Our editor, **Jon Singletary**, presents a forthright analysis of churches and faith-based organizations building orphanages and other residential care as a primary response in an attempt to "rescue" orphans. He offers a compelling model in *Les Enfants de Dieu* in Rwanda, a transitional home for boys that emphasizes reunification.

With respect to the "doing," **Lynne Hybels**, advocate for global engagement at Willow Creek Community Church, and **Kerry Olson**, founder and president of Firelight Foundation, offer practical, concrete and sustainable suggestions for churches ready to move into action. But this action

on behalf of vulnerable children is anchored in key principles of community engagement: listening, relationship building and investing in local partners.

One additional note. This has been a collaborative effort with the Faith to Action Initiative (www.faithbasedcarefororphans.org), of which I am a founding member. The Faith to Action Initiative promotes dialogue and builds relationships with church leaders and faith-based organizations in the United States to ensure that orphans and vulnerable children receive care inside the family and community first. It has emerged as a key resource for Christians seeking to make a lasting difference in the lives of these children. We hope this issue will educate and inspire you to join your faith with good deeds that will support families and ministries and strengthen communities for years to come.

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