

African AIDS Orphans Find Shelter

Businessman Rob Smith is returning to his homeland to purchase farms that will provide homes for 400,000 children

Haunted by pictures of children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic, Rob Smith has returned to South Africa, the country he grew up in but left nearly 30 years ago because of his disgust for apartheid.

After selling his home in Everett, Wash., and leaving a prosperous cabinet-making business, Smith is putting "flesh to a dream." In the next decade he hopes to purchase 4,000 farms in South Africa, eventually providing homes for 400,000 children orphaned by an AIDS outbreak that has left an estimated 13 million children in Africa under the age of 15 with one parent and 3.6 million with no parents.

"He's held this dream in his heart for several years," said Karen Schaeffer, who helps coordinate outreaches and fund raising for the project. "[In 2002], the Lord really started to convict him about going back to South Africa."

The seed for the project was planted when Smith saw a 3,000-acre farm for sale in Zambia for \$42,000. He saw how affordable the project could be and how far the U.S. dollar could be spread.

Initially, Smith and his wife planned to adopt 100 children and care for them on a farm. He ruled out that idea because the scope wasn't big enough.

“He wanted to help as many kids as he could,” said Marc Fulmer, a friend of Smith’s who is now involved in the project. “Adopting just wasn’t enough.”

Smith shared his dream with Fulmer after a Sunday morning church service. One week later, the 53-year-old Fulmer told Smith he wanted to be part of the project. In September, Fulmer and his wife moved to South Africa to take charge of building the villages.

Fulmer, a successful Seattle building contractor, will oversee the construction of 60,000 buildings over the life of this ambitious project. Each “village” will consist of prefab homes big enough for six to seven children. It won’t be dorm living. Homes will be built in clusters of five, and each cluster will share one common meeting place. It’s there that meals will be eaten and classes will be taught.

By opting for a small meeting place and not building one large school, Fulmer said initial costs will be capped, and progressive growth can be managed more easily. Communities on each farm will house about 120 orphans and 30 widows.

“Go-Goes,” a South African term for grandmothers, will be in each house. They will cook the meals and care for the children. “They will function as a family,” Fulmer said.

The project has quickly gone from idea to action. In November 2002, Smith’s idea became the Agathos Foundation, a Christian-based program. Agathos is Greek for “good.” In September, the foundation was nearing a deal on its first purchase, a 1,000-acre farm in Winterton, South Africa. Also in September 35 people from Smith and Fulmer’s church—Mars Hill Church—made a

three-week outreach to South Africa.

The purpose of the farms is twofold: to provide a place to live and a source of revenue. The objective is self-sufficiency. Support is expected to be temporary because long-term costs will be covered by the sales of the farm products. Children will not be expected to work on the farm unless they're interested in pursuing a career in agriculture.

Eventually, Fulmer said businesses will also be bought, and profits will be used to support the villages. He's careful to avoid referring to the homes as orphanages.

"We're trying to get away from the word orphanage because it tends to have certain connotations," Fulmer said. "Orphanages always need to be sponsored, constantly needing funds. What is key to our model is we're self-sustaining."

Fulmer admits at times he is overwhelmed by the size of the project.

"Once I wrapped my mind around this, I saw that I'm totally not qualified for this job," he said. "It's too huge. It's massive. I really need to rely on my faith that God is going to supply what we need and that He is going to lead me."

Smith, the son of a pastor, is neither rich nor an experienced fund-raiser. But he has a plan for funding. If 250 individuals pay \$25 a month for six years, he said the finances for a village would be met and no more support would be necessary.

"Once the village is up and running, it takes care of itself,"

Fulmer said.

Gail Wood

For more information about the Agathos Foundation or to send a tax-deductible contribution, write to 11701 25th Ave. S.E., Everett, WA 98208; call 425-357-6799; or visit .