

# Watoto Children's Choir Spreads Joyful Message of Hope

**Pentecostal missionaries in Uganda began the ministry to help children orphaned by AIDS and war**

With exotic African rhythms sounding in the background, 11-year-old Benon Kalinimi smiled, sang and danced as if he didn't have a care in the world. Had he not told his testimony, the audience at First United Methodist Church in Phoenix likely would never have thought the young Ugandan had been orphaned or that his future once looked bleak.

After both of his parents died of AIDS, Benon ended up among Uganda's estimated 1.1 million orphaned children, and was forced to hustle daily searching for food in the streets of the capital city, Kampala. That was before he encountered Watoto Child Care Ministries.

Today he and 17 other children, ages 6 to 13, are traveling throughout the United States spreading a message of joy and hope through song and dance as part of the Watoto Children's Choir. With a newfound faith in Christ, Benon told the audience at a recent Concert of Hope that he wants to become a doctor "to provide free health care to the poor people in Uganda." He credits his involvement with the choir as a major turning point in his young life.

"This experience changes their lives like you cannot believe," said Timothy Skinner, who co-wrote all of the songs for the choir with his brother, James. "Kids who were introverted, shy and lacked self-confidence learn to work together, get to see

the world and [gain] a sense of achievement.”

The ministry was founded in 1991 by Skinner’s parents, Canadian missionaries Gary and Marilyn Skinner, to care for the thousands of Ugandan children orphaned by AIDS and civil war. Today it has bases in the United States, Canada and England, and since 1994 has been sending the choir around the world to minister free of charge, using a blend of contemporary gospel, African rhythm and dance. The children audition to be in the choir and are allowed to participate in only one tour.

Timothy Skinner, who is the choir coordinator, said the tour helps to increase awareness about the AIDS crisis in Uganda and raise money for the Watoto (translated “the children”) ministry through love offerings during concerts.

Calling Watoto a “spiritual discipleship program,” Skinner said the 40 children selected each year for the choir go through a four-month training period during which they learn English, dance choreography, social etiquette and teamwork. When on tour, the children participate in daily Bible studies.

Though the choir now has a robust schedule, its first U.S. tour was a step of faith. After traveling to the United States, Gary Skinner—who moved from Toronto in 1983 to plant 8,000-member Kampala Pentecostal Church, which is affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada—purchased a used bus and literally booked the tour out of the yellow pages.

Today there are enough invitations to support two choirs, with one touring the United States and another in Australia. The choirs spend six months on the road at a cost of \$50,000 each.

Sales of T-shirts, CDs, videos and jewelry, along with offerings and sponsorships, fund the tours. When the tour is completed, the children return to Watoto's children's villages and remain under the direction of the ministry.

Watoto raises money to build single-family homes for the orphans. So far, 60 homes, at a cost of roughly \$10,000 each, have been built in three villages. Each house accommodates eight children and a housemother, who looks after the children.

Nearly 1,500 children receive care through the ministry, though the Skinners hope to one day help as many as 30,000. Future plans include building a secondary school, technical training college, retreat center and children's camp.

"Our goal is to equip these precious children with the essential moral values and life skills," Gary Skinner said. "That will enable them to make a significant and lasting impact on the future of their country."

**Bruce Goolsby in Phoenix**

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For more information about Watoto Child Care Ministries, write to P.O. Box 1320, Lutz, FL 33548-1320, call (813) 948-4343, or visit .