

Medical missionary Debbie Dortzbach

DEBBIE DORTZBACH, A MISSIONARY IN NAIROBI, KENYA, BELIEVES THE CHURCH HAS AN ANSWER TO THIS DEADLY EPIDEMIC.

Left: Dortzbach (right) with Ruth Calver, wife of World Relief President, Clive Calver, attends a Rwandan woman who later died of AIDS in 1999.

Could an AIDS-free generation be possible? Yes, says Debbie Dortzbach, who is already seeing progress in the midst of a staggering epidemic in Africa.

When Dortzbach signed up to be a medical missionary in Africa, being kidnapped by a rebel militia group was not part of her dream for serving the sick and dying. She and her husband, Karl, were in for a surprise.

On a summer morning in 1974, rebels armed with machine guns and grenades burst into the Mihireta Yesus (Compassion of Jesus) Hospital in Ghinda, Ethiopia, where Debbie was working, and abducted her and another missionary nurse, Anna Strikwerda.

The men were members of the Eritrean Liberation Front, a militia group seeking independence in that region of northern Ethiopia. They forced the two women to run toward the mountains in 104-degree heat. When Strikwerda couldn't keep up, they shot her dead in front of Debbie.

Karl negotiated furiously for his wife's release, and after 26 agonizing days, she was set free. The Dortzbachs returned to the United States, but Africa remained in their hearts. In 1980, they returned to the continent and settled down to raise

their family on African soil: Joshua, who was born just a few months after the kidnapping, Hannah and Jesse.

The story of the abduction, which is chronicled in the Dortzbachs' book, *Kidnapped* (Great Commission Publications), is one of fear, loneliness, doubt and depression, but it is more than just that, the couple writes. "The real story is about God's power and peace being seen in the midst of those dark human we need to experience is that when the Son of God shines directly upon us, the darkness disappears like shadows in the noonday sun."

FULFILLING THE VISION Many women would have succumbed to fear and chosen a quiet life in suburbia, but Dortzbach refused to be sidetracked from the vision the Lord gave her. She completed two Master's degrees—one in nursing and one in international public health. Today, she and her family live in Nairobi, Kenya, where she serves as AIDS/HIV program specialist for World Relief, the international assistance arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. She is considered one of the world's leading developers of church-based AIDS initiatives in Africa.

"Community health has always been my focus," Dortzbach explains, "and when HIV and AIDS appeared, a ministry to help churches become biblically involved became my passion."

The scourge of AIDS and HIV is staggering in sub-Saharan Africa (the portion of the continent south of the Sahara Desert). According to UNAIDS (an organization run by the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the World Bank and several other agencies), this is the sad state of the AIDS/HIV epidemic there:

****70** percent of the world's HIV-positive people live on this part of the continent.

****8** percent of the population—23.3 million adults and children—are infected.

****In some cities, 30 percent of adults are infected with HIV.**

****More women than men have HIV (12 to 10).**

****A whopping 55 percent of HIV-positive adults are women.**

Many Christians are overwhelmed by these figures and either bury their heads in the sand or react in a self-righteous way.

“Even in Africa, there is still a problem with people thinking that [infected] people get what is coming to them,” says Dortzbach. “There is still an element of self-righteousness.

“At the foot of the cross, we may not all have AIDS, but we all have something. Just because my sin doesn’t have the consequences that yours does, it doesn’t make me more righteous.”

Although the AIDS epidemic is much worse in Africa than it is in the West, Dortzbach says that western countries fueled the problem—and continue to do so. “The sexual revolution of the ’60s was the ‘petrie dish’ of the AIDS epidemic of the ’90s,” she says. “To a large extent, the cultural revolution of the ’60s in the States set the stage for this virus that most likely began here in Africa.

“We in the West bear a great responsibility for how we started the sexual revolution that created the host environment for AIDS—not only to incubate, but then to spread wildly. The sexual revolution of the West spread across the world. The virus was here in Africa waiting for an environment to facilitate its growth.”

FINDING THE ANSWER Dortzbach believes there is an answer for AIDS and that it is possible to work toward an AIDS-free generation. “In this crisis, you don’t have to have a medical background,” she says. “What pulled me is the absolute conviction that only the church could make an impact, that the church could have an impact, and that God could use this

redemptively.”

Working with World Relief, Dortzbach has developed a church-based program called Mobilizing for Life, which not only treats AIDS patients but also mobilizes the church to provide creative solutions. The program works with local churches, capitalizing on existing structures in the community, not just in Africa, but also in Central America, the Caribbean and Asia.

“We are aggressive with a distinctively Christian message,” says Dortzbach, who makes no apologies for her beliefs. “We’re unashamed of our stand. We’re very focused on the Bible, and we stress that following God’s way is the best way in the prevention of HIV. It’s an exciting challenge to help church leaders see their role and walk alongside them to help them facilitate this.”

In fact, Dortzbach believes the AIDS epidemic is a “beautiful opportunity for evangelism. We’ve seen the church already make a difference.”

In Rwanda, for example, Mobilizing for Life workers and local church leaders met with the minister of health and showed him their policy statement and plan. He pledged to support their initiative. “We’re building on that,” she says, “and local churches are developing a church-based curriculum for youth [and] a home-care manual and providing training for pastoral counseling.”

Mobilizing for Life works with all Christian denominations (Protestant and Catholic) in countries such as South Africa, Malawi and Mozambique. Sudan is targeted to follow suit. “South Africa abandoned the AIDS issue because they were occupied with the apartheid issue,” Dortzbach says. “One in 4 people are now infected. A year ago it was 1 in 8.

“Countries that do not look at this seriously can be in for a shock in a few years,” she warns. “You can look at any country

in the world where there has been war, and AIDS is right on its tail. It's happened in Rwanda, Mozambique and Cambodia."

FOREIGN AID The mission statement of World Relief is "churches helping churches help the hurting." So what support is World Relief receiving from U.S. churches in the fight against AIDS?

"It is untapped," Dortzbach says. "There has been a fear that [because] the term homosexual is attached to AIDS [churches] will be turned off. There's been a range of [responses, from] outright denial to graduated concerns for orphans and babies. But we have to go further and understand the whole problem.

"Who among us is reaching out to the adulterous woman?" Dortzbach asks. "Who among us is not just dropping the stone, but reaching out to her? The Pharisees acknowledged that they had no right to throw the stone. But they failed to extend mercy. We'll be judged for that."

Dortzbach understands that Christians can feel overwhelmed in the face of such an enormous epidemic. "As people of God, we've always been in the minority—but we've always made a difference.

"Jesus didn't ignore the 5,000 because there were so many," she says. "We have a big God, and He can do big things."

Elisabeth Farrell writes frequently on the underground and persecuted church. She is co-author of *China: The Hidden Miracle*. Elisabeth visited World Relief's outreaches in Sudan and Kenya, where she interviewed **Debbie Dortzbach**.

Debbie and her family with members of their church in Nairobi, Kenya