

US Church Faces Neglect Allegations After Haitian Children Die in Church Orphanage Fire

For a limestone mantel from the Waldorf Astoria, the church that owns the Olde Good Things antique stores asks for \$8,500.

But for the death of each child in a fire at a home it ran in Haiti, parents said the same church offered to pay just \$50 to \$100 in family compensation—along with \$150 for funeral-related costs such as new clothes and transportation.

The wealth of the Church of Bible Understanding in the United States has long stood in contrast with the shoddiness of its two children's homes in Haiti, which have faced years of infractions and failed two state inspections. But the gap came into even sharper focus on Feb. 13, when the fire killed 13 children and two adult caretakers described by the church's lawyer as disabled. Authorities suspect the fire started because the home used candles instead of a functioning generator or battery in a country where power failures are frequent.

The deaths have devastated parents like Eustache Arismé, 33, who put his two daughters in the home shortly after they were born because he has a withered left arm and cannot find work. His daughters Nedjie, 4, and Vanise, 3, died in the fire at the home, which is known as an orphanage in Haiti although many children have at least one living parent.

Like Arismé's daughters, the children in such "orphanages" are usually handed over, often as babies, by parents who struggle to support them and want them to at least get food and shelter. Parents generally keep custody and are allowed to

visit.

“At first, I was happy to see the children growing up in the orphanage. But now I profoundly regret my decision,” Arismé said. “When we put our children in the orphanage, the owners welcomed us. Now, after this tragedy, they send a lawyer to deal with us.”

The lawyer for the church, Osner Fevry, said it is being unfairly singled out by critics in Haiti and overseas. The church may send less money to Haiti than some people would like, he said. But many other U.S. groups solicit donations in the name of needy Haitians and only send a fraction to the country after staff salaries and overhead, he added.

“It happens to hundreds and thousands of American organizations working in Haiti, raising millions of dollars in the names of churches and NGOs in Haiti,” he said.

Fevry said the church members running the homes left for the U.S. a few days after the fire not to avoid prosecution, but because they were hounded by police and local media. Along with compensation and spending money for the parents, the church is assuming the costs of funerals for the 15 victims.

“I don’t think the church can endorse legal responsibility, but moral responsibility, yes,” Fevry acknowledged. “Morally, how come there was a candle to get light for those kids?”

The homes have run into problems before. A series of inspections beginning in November 2012 found they didn’t meet minimum health and safety standards, with overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and insufficient trained staff. Haitian authorities stripped them of accreditation.

When the church members brought in outside experts, one declared them “completely clueless about what is needed to take care of that many babies.”

"I'm shocked," she said. "That no one has died."

The orphanages failed another round of state inspections in 2017 but hired Fevry to fight closure, according to Haitian child welfare authorities. They said closing an orphanage can take months or years, particularly if the management has money or influence.

Through its spokeswoman, the church declined to comment on specific allegations of neglect and mistreatment at its children's homes in Haiti.

"We are devastated by the tragic fire that took the life of our children at our Haitian orphanage. Words would fail to express our immense grief and heartbreak," the church said in a written statement. "We are taking this very seriously and are moving forward to help all of those affected by this horrific accident."

'I Cried Bitterly'

On the night of Feb. 13, 61 children were sleeping inside the church's two-story home in the town of Kenscoff in the mountains above the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, according to the Institute of Social Welfare. A 16-year-old boy living there told authorities that he and a caretaker went out to buy candles, which they lit in each of the rooms filled with children, then went to bed.

A short time later, around 9 p.m., the smell of smoke filled the orphanage. Thirteen children, ages 3 to 18, died, along with a 39-year-old woman and a 34-year-old man.

Among them was Tania Caristan's 6-year-old son, Ricardo.

Caristan makes a living selling items on the street and washing neighbors' clothes. She moved back in with her parents, and said she had to leave Ricardo with her estranged husband.

It was only two months later that she learned her former husband had put the boy in a Church of Bible Understanding home. Shocked, she went there with a copy of the birth certificate to get her baby back.

But a white man told her through an interpreter that she couldn't take him because she was not one of the people who had given him to the orphanage, she said.

"I tried everything I could to convince the person in charge at the orphanage," she said quietly, as she watched her younger daughter play outside their shack. "I cried bitterly."

A security guard opened the gate and asked her to leave. One of her sisters later tried to get the boy back but also failed.

But Caristan never lost hope. She always thought she would see her son again one day.

She never did.

The day after the fire, the boy's father told Caristan's sister he was dead. Caristan rushed to the hospital to see her son's face for the last time, but he had already been taken to the morgue. She said no one from the orphanage or state had contacted her since.

"Whatever my situation, it would have been better to have my son with me," she said. "He would have eaten crumbs from my bit of bread ... If I'd known his father was going to take him to an orphanage, I would have kept my child."

Through its spokeswoman, the church declined to comment on Caristan's story.

Haitian prosecutors have begun a criminal investigation into the church's homes, which held 154 children at the time of the fire, according to the national child-welfare institute. The institute finally shut down the homes after the fire and took

28 children into custody to be reunited with parents or family members. More than 100 other children have fled.

Some children raised in the orphanages say they were generally treated kindly. Others describe conditions as mentally and physically abusive, including social isolation and beatings.

Anaika Francois, 19, told The Associated Press that she entered the homes at six because her parents were too poor to take care of her and her little sister. She said children with bed-wetting issues from about that age were physically punished. In bad cases, they were stretched across a table and spanked by the monitor or head of the orphanage, she said.

"That would often produce marks, in which case the monitor would give you a bath with warm salt water," she said. "The marks would disappear in two or three days."

Fedania Charles, 20, said that when she lived with the church, children were hit on the buttocks for wetting their beds and then washed with salty warm water.

"You could see the bruises for at least 24 hours," she said.

James Dindin, 36, said he was given to the orphanage at around 9 months old. He said that as a teenager, he would be put in a "punishment room" with a single window along with about a dozen other children for two or three weeks, and escorted to the bathroom by an employee. At times, he said, rebellious children were expelled and forced to sleep on the streets.

He said the trauma remains for him and other children he grew up with in the homes.

"Every time I see one of the kids that I grew up with on the streets begging for money. ... it would trigger back everything," he said. "Almost every day."

The church declined to comment specifically on the former residents' allegations.

Haiti has more than 700 “orphanages” housing more than 25,000 children, and only about 35 of the homes meet the standards of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children, according to the Haitian child welfare institute and the UN children’s fund, UNICEF.

Defenders of Haitian orphanages say despite any defects, the homes help children who would otherwise be in far worse conditions with desperately poor parents unable to feed or clothe them. But child welfare advocates say the orphanages harm children by creating incentives to separate them from their parents. By one estimate, Haitian orphanages receive more than \$100 million a year in donations, but another study has shown that just a single grant of \$220 can help a poor Haitian family maintain a child in acceptable conditions at home.

“No child should be placed in an orphanage,” said Maria Luisa Fornara, UNICEF’s representative in Haiti. “I would ask to any of these organizations coming in and supporting orphanages, would they want their children to be in those places?. ... I don’t think so.”

The Forever Family

The Church of Bible Understanding was founded as the “Forever Family” in the early 1970s by Stewart Traill, a former vacuum cleaner salesman. In his mid-30s, he started preaching on the streets of Philadelphia and New York, creating a string of communal houses around the Northeast that drew young people and runaways.

It wasn’t a comfortable life. Former members said they were crammed into tightly packed rooms, slept on mats on the floor and discouraged from dating, attending school or doing anything outside of church activities. Members worked for church businesses, and, in turn, received small allowances.

In September 1982, four members of the church were convicted

in Philadelphia for beating Traill's then 13-year-old son with a belt and a board, seriously enough that he was hospitalized.

The Forever Family had 10,000 members at its peak in the mid-1970s, according to the *Encyclopedia of Cults, Sects and New Religions*. Traill, who died in 2018 at age 82, rechristened it as the Church of Bible Understanding in 1976, and the church is now believed to have 30 to 50 members.

Over the years, the church ran a string of enterprises, including a carpet-cleaning company lampooned on a TV episode of *Seinfeld* about a sect-linked business hired by one of the main characters. Contracts to demolish old buildings evolved into a business selling vintage architectural features.

That became Olde Good Things, which has a thriving online business and retail shops in New York, Los Angeles and at the headquarters in Scranton, Pennsylvania. They offer antique and vintage home décor such as crystal chandeliers for as much as \$22,000. One of the least expensive items for sale this week is a pair of antique bronze door hinges for \$55.

Olde Good Things, which says on its website that it donates half of its profits to the church's mission work in Haiti, announced plans last year to open a new flagship store on West 52nd Street in Manhattan this year.

Public tax documents depict a church and business with considerable overlap. In its most recent filing, the church reported revenue of \$6.6 million and expenses of \$2.2 million. It reported a net loss of \$125,537 from Olde Good Things, and the church loaned \$3.7 million to the business.

The church listed \$19 million in assets. Those assets included a 12,000-square foot house in Coral Springs, Florida where Traill lived with his wife, exempt from state property taxes on religious grounds, according to public records.

The church says in its tax records that "a large part of our

operation is to fund our missionary work,” operating the two homes in Haiti’s capital and distributing food in the countryside. The Olde Good Things website says, “We appreciate our patrons and want them to understand that profits from their purchase go directly to supporting this worthy work.”

The church also received food grants worth more than \$579,000 from the U.S. Agency for International Development between 2003 and 2012. USAID rejected their grant application as “non-competitive” in 2013, the same year the Haitian government said their homes for children did not meet minimum standards. It has not been renewed.

Former members and employees say the work in Haiti was always a central focus of the church and the business.

Church members would frequently talk at Olde Good Things about their work in Haiti and would bring children from the homes to the U.S. for medical treatment, said Rashida Lovely, who worked as an accounting clerk and supervisor for the company and said they treated her well. She recalled using a check from the business to buy toiletries and medical supplies for the children’s homes, which were then sent to the Caribbean country on a church-owned plane.

Any problems at the homes, Lovely said, were likely a result of business revenues being strained or because most of the work in Haiti was done by older church members.

“They did the best they can do up until now and there are not enough young people to support it,” she said. “They are too old to be doing it anymore.” {eo}

The Associated Press

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