

Chosen by a Child

Christian humanitarian organization World Vision serves families in need in more than 100 countries. Child sponsorship has been an integral part of World Vision's ministry, which is well known among Christians and the church in the U.S. But now, the nonprofit organization has introduced Chosen, a unique sponsorship program and one that significantly involves the local church and its leadership. Most importantly, Chosen puts "the power to choose in a child's hands."

Reward Sibanda, World Vision's senior church advisor on the church and ministry partnerships team for the Central U.S. region, is now based in Dallas but is originally from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Sibanda spoke with Charisma and brought along Pastor Brandon Cordell to share his church's experience with the program.

Becoming a Chosen One

The process is simple. Anyone in a church in the U.S. who wants to participate must first sign up and supply their photo. World Vision sends these to a community somewhere in the world where staff are preparing a time for kids to choose their sponsors. Once the child chooses their sponsor, the sponsor receives a photo of the child holding the sponsor's photo along with a letter about why the child chose the particular sponsor.

This choice empowers the child because many of these children have waited for months or years to be chosen as a sponsored child. Now, it's their turn.

The cost to sponsor a child in the Chosen program is \$39 a month and is combined with other sponsors' gifts to support community projects that help the sponsored child and other children thrive. These projects may be supplying clean water, health care, nutrition or education, whatever they need. The

sponsors receive regular updates on how their donations are meeting the needs of their sponsored child as well as the community.

The child will want to stay connected to his sponsor, so letters will go back and forth across the miles, bonding child and sponsor across the miles. Prayers for each other will reach the heart of God the Father, who cares for each child and their Chosen sponsor. After all, God also chose His children too and supplies their every need!

Creating the New Program

World Vision's new CEO asked God what was next in child sponsorship. The ministry had already had a long record of success through this avenue of ministry around the world.

"How can we make child sponsorship look more like the kingdom?," he asked. "And that is essentially where the concept of Chosen was born. A group of people got together and prayed big prayers. They said we are about children's empowerment, but the model we've been doing child sponsorship with before still mandates that you have people within the American or Western context going to a bunch of kids that may be on pieces of paper and choosing them. And yes, the gospel happens and transformation happens, but that child is still left unempowered, right? They're not empowered to make choices. So what if, like the gospel and like what we profess, we actually gave the power to choose in the child's hands. And for most of those children, this would be the first choice that they make. So we said, 'What if we empowered them with the power to choose the most important thing—who gets to sponsor you and who gets to disciple you?'"

Churches who participate in this turnkey program have profound experiences, but first, believers in those churches must submit themselves to the program and give up their own rights to choose the child they sponsor.

“People humble themselves to be chosen by a community of children from across the world,” Sibanda says. “We’ve seen God do phenomenal things.”

The program also means a commitment from church (or school) leadership to travel to the country involved.

“The incredible thing about Chosen is the ability for a church or school community to all sponsor children from the same community together,” Sibanda says. “So there’s accountability and there’s discipleship, but there’s also the community aspect of what that looks like. For example, individuals can go on our website and sponsor a child and do it the same way, but we really wanted to leverage the power of community that we find in the kingdom with Chosen specifically.”

One Church’s Experience

Cordell is lead pastor, along with his wife, Laura, at Rebel Church in San Antonio, Texas. He first learned about World Vision at the organization’s annual pastors’ gathering in 2019.

“I was just so impressed with the complete work that they do in the communities they serve,” Cordell says. “It wasn’t something they were just throwing money at, but they were actually in every detail of the community, making sure that every aspect was taken care of, from education to water to the gospel.”

With that first impression in mind, Sibanda approached him with the new opportunity in Chosen. The pastor signed on quickly.

“It was like, ‘Yes, we want to be a part of whatever you’re doing,’” Cordell says. “We had originally set it up early in 2020. And, obviously, we walked into a season of a pandemic and uncertainty and didn’t know what it was going to look like or if it was even going to happen.”

But Sibanda came back with some changes to the program, and Cordell was still gung ho.

“World Vision is an organization that innovates and is concerned about one thing, the mission,” says Cordell, who confirmed his interest for Rebel Church to participate.

“We had the opportunity to look beyond ourselves as a church and look beyond ourselves as individuals,” Cordell says, reflecting on Jesus’ command in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

For Rebel Church, participating in the Chosen program was a life-changing experience.

“It gave us, as a church, an opportunity to engage our people in getting outside of themselves and taking a different approach to this season of life,” Cordell says. “I’m reminded of a lady named Alicia in our church who’s a single mom raising two boys and really struggling to make it on her own, but through the Chosen experience and being able to take her eyes off of her situation in this season and sacrificially step out in faith and say if God said it’s my responsibility to love my neighbor as myself and that’s how I love Him best, it was just so exciting to see her take that step of faith and see the excitement in her eyes on the Reveal Sunday when she got to see the child who chose her. She said ‘Every day I get up and I go to work, and every day I take my kids to school, I’ve got that child’s face in my mind,’ and it’s just a powerful experience.”

In the case of Pastor Cordell, he saw God orchestrating his child choosing his family in a special way.

“I come from a family of four boys,” Cordell says. “I’ve got three brothers. I’m the oldest and we all have been named we’ve been known as the Beatles all of our life. So our

Sunday, when we got our child, our child's name was Brian, and to perfect that was God's thumbprint on what we were doing. And so we prayed and asked God for it to be divine."

His isn't the only story in his church like that.

"We hear so many stories like that from our church congregants," Cordell says. "The name, the birth date, it's just God orchestrating just a powerful, powerful moment. And as far as global missions is concerned, I've been around church all my life, and this was the single most powerful global missions outreach I've ever been a part of."

World Vision is supplying an instrument or tool for pastors to use to help fulfill Jesus' command to love others.

"As a pastor, regardless of your denomination, regardless of your unique mission and vision to your local community, I think every pastor could agree that at the end of the day, our goal is to get the people we lead to really live out what Jesus said when He said to the Pharisees, the greatest commandments can be summed up in these two things, you love God with all your heart, your soul and your strength, but equally as important is to love your neighbor as yourself, and whether that's your neighbor across the street or your neighbor across the world. What World Vision does is it gives you the tools as a pastor to engage your community in living out the words of Jesus in such an authentic way by simply just saying, Yes, and so as a church, and I know for for other churches, when you will simply just step out and challenge and engage your congregation to authentically live out the commands and the words of Jesus, a simple Yes can really transform lives across the globe. But what I found is that it has transformed my church and my people in such a way that nothing else that I've ever done, no series, no program, has transformed people in such a real and authentic way, as when we challenge them to love people they have never met and never seen."

It's not just giving though. Pastor Cordell emphasizes the relationships that are created through Chosen.

"You're not just giving money toward something," Cordell says. "You're actually giving your people the opportunity to engage in a real relationship that has real kingdom impact, that has more impact than you could ever do on your own outside of a partnership like this, so everybody needs to do it."

Sibanda agrees. The experience is not to be missed.

"It is the most missionary transformational experience you can have at your church," Sibanda says. "We show up and we set up these photo booths out in the lobby in the foyer and now people are going in for the service. What the pastor is trying to do is just preach an incredible message, just usually around being chosen, which is central to our Christian message. And after that, all the congregants come out, and there's this photo booth set up, and they go and they take what we call the most epic picture ever. And then they sign up and humble themselves to be chosen. After the service I [or someone like me] and the pastor jump on a plane and go to a village in Kenya, in Central America, for wherever the pastor has a vision and a passion and feels like their communities are called to walk with, so we go there. And when we get there, we have this huge choosing party."

The choosing party is where the program really becomes fun.

"They set up a tent, and there's a red carpet," Sibanda says. "And there are pictures of the church members on the wall hanging and there's kids just dancing, there's red carpet, there's music, there's rejoicing in the whole village, and they get to pick who their sponsor is going to be. And once they pick, they go into a tent next to that choosing party tent and they get to write a letter to their sponsor telling them why they chose them. And then they take a picture holding the picture of their sponsor."

This all happens within a week. The pastor tells his story of what it was like to go the village in their chosen country, then his church has their own experience.

“Everybody walks out into this foyer, and now there are envelopes with people’s names on them,” Sibanda says. “You find your name, and you open that envelope. The first thing you see is a picture of the child who chose you holding your picture. And in that envelope is a letter they wrote telling you why they chose you.

Powerful testimonies come out of these connections across the miles.

“I have this incredible testimony to where someone’s like, ‘We just lost a daughter, and we just couldn’t go on, and the girl who chose us from Kenya actually has the same name as her.’ We’ve had some people say, ‘Oh my gosh, the kid who chose me has the same birthday as me.’ So we’ve seen God orchestrate this and make this into what is just an incredible week. And that again is the path for discipleship between that community and those children across the world.”

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