

Into the Arms of Love

As the number of homeless, abandoned children grows, caring Christians are reaching out with Christ's compassion.

Researchers tell us that by 2010 the number of orphans worldwide will reach 106 million—a number equal to more than one-third the population of the United States. For most of these children, living is a bitter struggle for survival—nothing more, nothing less. Life and love are often lost in hand-to-mouth existence.

Furthermore, a growing number of them have not lost their parents to death. The children simply have been abandoned. Many are handicapped. All are unwanted. Those who are not exploited are ignored.

The problem is so widespread, the crisis so large, that no one ministry, congregation or life can really do much to change it. Or can it? Charisma researched this question in five countries to find out how a few dedicated people are changing the lives of innumerable children.

Kids Who Eat Mud

Picking the Burnettes out of the crowd at the international airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, was easy. Sherry's blonde curls bounced as she flashed a bright smile and waved. Her husband, Bobby, walked next to her decked in a Stetson hat and cowboy boots. There was no doubt this couple had some Texas roots (though they are from Florida).

But Haiti, not the United States, has been home to the Burnettes for 13 years. They are driven by one thought: saving

one more orphan from the clutches of poverty in Haiti.

Since 1990, the Burnettes have built eight schools and churches in remote areas. This fall, they will be feeding almost 3,000 children a day.

The Burnettes' latest project is Love a Child Village, based in Fond Parisien, about seven miles from the border with the Dominican Republic. Here, they are building an orphanage to house 100 children. The property includes a carpentry shop to teach children at the orphanage, as well as local street children, a trade.

One Christian school on the property already is operational. The second of four schools is expected to be finished in the fall, as well as a feeding center for 1,200 children.

Poverty is so severe in Haiti that even children with parents feel blessed to eat every other day. During a recent trip into the mountains to the Burnettes mobile medical clinic, an elderly looking man came down from the village of Greffin. He cradled a small bundle in his arms.

"Fifteen days ago my wife gave birth to our sixth child, this little boy. Then she died a few days later," he said as tears began to form. "I have five other children. I have no way to feed him. I don't want my baby to die."

Sherry took the baby in her arms and asked, "What is his name?" Slowly, shaking his head, the man explained that he didn't want to name the child if he was going to die.

For the Burnettes, this is a story they hear far too often.

“Our newest baby just came to us a week ago,” Sherry reflects. “Little ‘Mr. No-Name’ was brought to us by his elderly grandmother. The baby is 8 months old but cannot drink well. We constantly feed him using eyedroppers of milk.

“In our medical clinic, we have treated children who have eaten mud—or worse, goat feces—just to make the hunger pain go away. We feed as many as we can. We take as many of these orphans in as we can. But there is never enough.”

Toddlers in Their 40s

About 100 miles across the Caribbean, on the front wall of a small compound outside Kingston, Jamaica, is a well-worn sign that reads, “The Golden Age Home.” Tragically, despite its cheerful inscription, innumerable orphans have been abandoned under this sign.

The children who are left here in the dirt are far more helpless than most. They are the handicapped. Many have twisted limbs and other physical problems. Born into families who have no means to care for even their healthy children, they simply are discarded in the night.

Inside the compound, tiny houses have been built around small grassy courtyards. Each section is populated according to a different set of horrifying needs. The saddest of all is Cluster D.

Several dozen orphans live in this section, most weighing no

more than 40 pounds. All are severely disabled. They cannot sit or stand. Only one or two can talk.

Jasmine McKay and Nadine Wall sit in the doorway, each showing a bright smile and giving a shy wave. They have epilepsy, and stay low on the concrete floor all day so they don't fall and hurt themselves.

They are the size of toddlers, but both are in their 40s. They cannot talk, so the staff must guess what they need when they grunt or yell.

This would be difficult enough if the home were fully staffed, but as Supervisor Yvonne Thomas explains: "We are past being short of staff. We need six workers, and I feel blessed we have three."

Thomas, a Christian woman who has dedicated her life to this work, cares for these orphans as if they were her own children. She stands by a room where severely handicapped orphans lie on the floor with soft white tethers attaching their ankles to an iron bedpost. This is the only way these children can be prevented from severely hurting themselves.

"It is over 90 degrees here almost all year. The doors are open to capture whatever breeze there is. If they were not tied to the bed, while I am busy with other children and out of sight, they would crawl out the door," Thomas says, her voice trailing off to imply the dangers waiting outside their humble sanctuary.

A few doors down is Pauline. She lies on her belly on a wheeled bed outside on the cracked sidewalk, enjoying the cool

of the shade and listening to the conversation of friends. Her body since birth has been so twisted that she will never be placed in any position but the one she is in. She too cannot talk.

She smiles as her nearby friend gives voice to the one dream she has. "She needs a television set," the friend says. "They can't get her bed through the door where the TV is."

The basic needs in Cluster D—food, medicine and shelter—are met by Food for the Poor of Deerfield Beach, Florida. The little things these orphans long for are harder to come by: paper to draw on, toys to play with, a little more food, sheets to keep up with the 15 changes a day some of the boys and girls require.

Medical needs are constant—there are never enough wheelchairs, cold and flu medications, and funding for surgeries. The residents are fed daily but never have quite enough.

Raising money to help the disabled is difficult. Even Christians are less likely to give to the disabled than to others in need.

Said one fund-raiser: "It is far easier to raise money for puppies and kitties than it is to raise money for starving children. The handicapped? That's even harder. People don't want to think about it."

Untold Rejection

Latvia, a former Soviet Bloc nation of Eastern Europe, is a

cold, flat place. Its winters are unforgiving to those without shelter. Its poverty is different from that of the Caribbean countries. There is starvation, child abuse and neglect, but often they are hidden behind the concrete walls of apartments built during the brutal regime of Soviet leader Josef Stalin, who ruled until 1953.

The two homes sponsored by Joyce Meyer Ministries and Rick Renner Ministries are beautiful, clean and well-kept. They are the kind of homes you'd want to raise your own children in.

But these homes are a happy ending. Each child arrives at them with a tragic story.

Take Madars, for example—a 9-year-old boy with the heart and soul of an artist. His paintings decorate his room and charm his teachers. When you look at this sweet boy's face it's hard to imagine the horror of his story.

He came to the orphanage when he was 4. He had just learned to walk, but he couldn't talk. He didn't even know how to use a fork or spoon.

He had lived with his mother in a tiny room and was left in his crib all day. At all hours men came and went, and the toddler observed things no child should ever see.

He was constantly sick with asthma. By the time the state took him away from his mother he had been hospitalized many times. After a month in the orphanage, says Director Alissa Stemple, "a big miracle happened."

“We were able to stop giving him asthma medicine—it never returned,” she says. “Then, at the age of 5, this child finally learned how to talk, use utensils and was toilet-trained.”

Madars is now on par developmentally but still has much pain yet to overcome. “We pray God will clean his heart of the bad things that happened to him and the things that he saw,” Stemple says.

Aiva’s is another sad story with a happy ending.

This little girl was abandoned by her mother the day she was born. She was soon placed in a state orphanage and a year later was placed with an adoptive family.

When she was young, Aiva’s world was rocked when her adoptive parents divorced. Her father told her: “Go away. I don’t want you,” and her mother echoed his rejection by telling Aiva: “I never loved you.” Even her grandmother closed her heart and home to her.

Aiva was so hurt, alone and scared that, like an infant, she couldn’t control her body functions. Using that as an excuse her father placed her in a mental hospital, where she would be today if not for the intervention of Joyce Meyer Ministries.

Today 12-year-old Aiva has a quiet smile, is excelling in school and loves Bible studies best of all. As the apostle Paul prayed in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, she is being blessed spirit, soul and body.

Abandoned Teens in Bulgaria

When we think of an orphan, we imagine a small child or helpless toddler. But what happens when an orphan matures to teenage years? Who will be there to care whether or not that child has the skills to survive?

In Bulgaria, by law, all orphanages are run by the state. As the children grow they are moved to different institutions. They are fed, clothed and given some level of education.

When they turn 18, they are released from the orphanages with no place to live and no job. Many of the girls are tempted by promised factory jobs but instead are lured out of Bulgaria and forced into prostitution.

Peter and Ellie Tashev, Christians in the city of Sofia, started ministering to orphans years ago. The bleak future of these youngsters broke their hearts, and they determined to make a difference.

The Tashevs are employed by Integra Ventures, a ministry based in Chicago. Integra's vision is to create new jobs and businesses in central and east Europe and Eurasia. They couple small- and medium-sized loans with ongoing training in Christian business principles and practices in many formerly communist countries.

Through this outreach, Peter has the opportunity to equip orphaned teens for the real world and to supply enthusiastic workers for clients who need to staff new businesses.

“We knew we had to teach these kids skills they would never get at school or in the orphanage if they were to become self-supporting adults,” says Peter. “Toward that end, Integra bought a house less than a block from the orphanage to set up to serve these kids.

“Over 30 teens are helped every week. We set up a series of after-school programs, we have a computer lab, we teach job skills, and train in the arts and in simple life lessons the kids have not gotten in the state-run orphanage.

“There is no requirement for these kids to go to church to take part in our programs, but they come to learn and they find something else: that we love them [and] Jesus loves them. This place is an expression of that love, and one by one, they start coming to church.”

A Miracle in Kenya

For many in Kenya, life is a struggle against the heat of the sun. Food can be difficult to come by. Feeding too many mouths can be hard to do. Parents often abandon their newborns rather than raise them amid a life of hunger. Such was the case with Daniel.

Abandoned as a baby near a railroad line on the outskirts of Rinoba City, Kenya, Daniel quickly became the victim of a hungry stray dog. It's hard to think about the pounding of the paws as the canine raced to seize him, the jagged teeth tearing into the terrified baby, his infant screams.

God only knows how Daniel's life was spared. Did someone see the attack and scare the animal away? Did the baby's own

shrieking and flailing distract the dog?

No one knows, but somehow he lived. A Good Samaritan found Daniel clinging to life. One entire side of his face, including his cheek and ear, were gone. His toes—gone.

Few newborns can survive longer than three hours outdoors. For the hundreds of abandoned babies found alive, many more are lost. But God had a different plan for this child.

He clung to life for two months in the local hospital. In honor of his surviving his own “lion’s den” his nurses named him Daniel. Little by little his prospects improved. Through constant care and an initial reconstructive operation, Daniel slowly came back to health.

After seven months, doctors took him to an ABC Center (Abandoned Baby Center) started by Frances Jones and run by Feed the Children of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Today he is learning to count and read. It will be at least a few years before his skin is strong enough to receive a graft. Until then, he must be careful.

Daniel escaped the jaws of a vicious animal. And, perhaps even more miraculously, he is HIV-negative.

What is Daniel’s future?

“It’s not going to be easy,” says Frances Jones, as she sits on the floor playing with the boy. “The surgery that was done when he was a baby is now a problem. His face has grown, and it is pulled as it grows against the scar.

She looks sadly at Daniel. "The kids have gotten old enough to realized he is different. It's so sad," she says.

Still, Daniel has a chance. He has the ABC Center and Feed the Children. Without them there would be no hope.

A Christian Response

Starting with the earliest biblical records, the "fatherless and widow" have embodied a special category of care by God. His Old Testament regulations protected orphans and widows from want and injustice.

His prophets indicted Israel for failing on this very account. "Learn to do right! ... Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Is. 1:17, NIV).

The New Testament also instructs with plain language: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

To live in a world of Golden Age Homes, Mr. No-Names and Daniels without embracing their needs as our own is to pay lip service to Jesus Christ. To be sure, it is difficult to answer such overwhelming need with personal action.

Yet, handfuls of people scattered across five countries have made an extraordinary impact on a desperate situation. To be a Christian, they will tell you, is to love the orphan.

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