

Loving the 'Unlovables': How Far Would You Go For Christ?

American missionaries Mike and Deena Van't Hul sold everything, moved their children to China and brought nearly 90 severely special-needs orphans into their family

Hearing one little word from God—go—was all it took for Mike and Deena Van't Hul to quit their jobs, sell everything and move their young family to a small village in China with only two suitcases and a box of Legos. They didn't exactly know what they'd do, whom they'd meet or why they were there; but they knew they had heard from God.

Their assignment eventually became clearer when an infant on the verge of death arrived at their front door. His frail body was wrecked with health problems including a cleft lip, cleft pallet, brain disorder, mental retardation, a hole in his heart and ambiguous gender. Yet after the couple unwrapped his naked body, they were overtaken by God's love and reminded of Christ's words: If you care for the least of these, you've cared for Me (Matt. 25:40).

"All I can say is that it was like holding Jesus," Deena recalls. "I know that sounds quirky, but it was like unwrapping the glory of God. You could feel the presence of the Lord so strongly."

In the words of the Van't Huls, it's been a "whirlwind" ever since. Through their ministry, Loaves and Fishes International, located outside Fuzhou, they have sheltered, clothed, fed and educated nearly 90 severely special-needs orphans who are considered "unlovable" by most locals. They've also watched miracle after miracle as God continues to open new doors of opportunity on a lifelong journey in learning to love the "unlovables" as He does.

Changed by His Love

Mike and Deena thought they understood God's love 15 years ago when they were starting their family in Englewood, Fla. As self-described nominal Christians, they attended church on Sundays but did little more to further their faith the rest of the week. Instead, they were actively pursuing the American dream and were well on their way with a comfortable home, great jobs and impressive resumes (Mike earned a bachelor's in business management; Deena has a master's in speech pathology). Having grown up in the church, the Van't Huls didn't think there was more to God than what they'd already experienced.

"We tried the best that we could to have a Christian family," Deena says, "but there was no fruit and we basically had one foot in the world and one foot in the church. Church was a cultural family thing and not a heart thing."

Their story soon took a dramatic turn after they reluctantly attended a revival service with Randy Clark, an evangelist best known for being a catalyst in the Toronto Blessing. The couple arrived to the meeting late, hoping to slip in to the back of the room. But God had other plans. An usher assumed they were pastors and, despite their protests, escorted them to the front row for Clark's message on receiving more from God. After an altar call, the Van't Huls would never be the same.

"We ran forward and I remember Randy just touched our foreheads and said, 'More, Lord,'" Deena recalls. "I hit the floor and Mike was being radically changed. We woke up the next morning and just felt like everything had been radically changed. That was the beginning."

Awakened By His Love

That was in 2000. Over the next few years the Van't Huls went on a handful of short-term missions trips. The first was with

Clark's Global Awakening ministry to Brazil, where they ministered to prostitutes on the streets and where God's love for humanity was awakened in them.

Deena recalls "feeling something supernatural" as she held a prostitute's hand: "I felt like I had a baptism of the Holy Spirit in love. I had heard about it before, but in the process it was so supernatural. [I was shocked by] the amount of love that was coming down from the Father through me to her. That was probably the beginning of the heart to the poor."

During a 2002 short-term mission trip to Mozambique to assist Rolland and Heidi Baker of Iris Ministries, Mike and Deena experienced the plight of orphans up-close and returned home wanting to do even more.

"At that point, as wonderful as short-term missions were, we left those trips completely changed by the Lord, but also feeling like something in our hearts was longing for more," Mike says. "There was something [in us] not quite fulfilled."

Transformed By His Love

After traveling to China to adopt their daughter, Priscilla, and seeing countless sick and dying children in orphanages, Mike and Deena couldn't deny that God was telling them to return to China. Facing an uncertain future yet knowing they had to be obedient, they sold everything and moved with their children—then ages 8, 5 and 1—8,000 miles across the globe.

"We didn't have a plan," Deena says. "We just thought, 'If He's calling us to China and we wait, and then the doors close, how would He feel? How would it be if we waited until we knew everything or until everyone in our life was OK with the move?' We just felt like He was saying, 'Go to China.' The gospel for us after we were touched has been really simple."

The move wasn't easy, however. The family crammed into an

apartment, battled rat and raw sewage issues, and struggled to learn the language amid culture shock. Yet every time a ministry door seemed to close due to laws (the local government originally forbid foreigners from serving as foster parents), they would pray and God would supernaturally open the door.

Meanwhile, God's love continued to overtake them. The day before their first orphan, Caleb, arrived at their doorstep, the Van't Huls received a book called *Home of Loving Faithfulness* about two English missionaries to Hong Kong who took in special-needs orphans 50 years prior. At that time, special-needs children were treated like animals—literally locked in cages—and considered the most unlovable of all humans. Mike and Deena thought they would help orphans in China but didn't think they could care for severely special-needs children.

"I knew we didn't have that kind of love," Deena says. "Nobody knows us better than us. You're talking about people who can't walk. Drooling. Having to wipe bottoms. This wasn't the cute little babies."

That all changed for the Van't Huls with the arrival of Caleb, whom they are now in the process of officially adopting. One child turned into two, then five, then a dozen. Loaves and Fishes now has 58 children in its care, along with 54 national paid staff members, six missionaries and six properties—all of which have been miraculous gifts that, like Caleb, seem to divinely arrive at their doorstep.

The ministry showers the children with love and creates a family atmosphere for them. It's also committed to taking those with the most severe cases of mental retardation and other ills only after hearing God tell them where to go and who to get. In fact, when Mike and Deena go into an orphanage they specifically ask staff which child is close to dying and which one is the most difficult to care for. They immediately

know that those are the children they should take with them. And in doing so, remarkably, Loaves and Fishes has earned such favor from the Chinese government that the ministry is now pursued for special projects and has been able to start a school for special-needs children.

“It’s been neat for us to see that from the beginning it’s not ever been about us,” Mike says. “We didn’t come with our talents or anything of ourselves to make this happen. We just came with His heart to serve and to give our lives as He led.”

–*Felicia Abraham*