

One church, one orphanage

AFRICA: Many church budgets include funds for missionaries, and many individual Christians donate to large international relief agencies—but one church decided to do more | *by Marvin Olasky, Susan Olasky*

Part two of a series by Marvin & Susan Olasky in Katima Mulilo, Namibia. Read [Part I](#)

Nestled under a grove of shade trees along the Zambezi River sits a home belonging to missionaries Rebecca and Gary Mink. About 100 yards further along the riverbank is the Children of Zion Village children's home. Both homes are painted a soft forest green, a good color for a building in dry, sandy Namibia, where sun and lack of rain bleach the landscape of color.

In June, which falls during Namibia's dry winter, the blue of the sky and the river, and a splash of scarlet from a bougainvillea climbing a fence, provide the only break to the setting's muted palette. The home itself with its 52 children, though, is a scene of drama. Most have lost at least one parent to AIDS. Several—including one boy who had been living in a tire—were rescued from slavery. Two deaf boys had lived on the streets. Eleven children are known to carry the HIV virus.

Children of Zion Village grew out of the shared vision of a Maryland businessman, a Christian missionary couple, and the congregation of Mount Zion, an evangelical United Methodist Church just north of Baltimore. The businessman, Benedict Schwartz, is the CEO of a software company there. He and his wife, Kathleen, are members of Mount Zion, where Kathleen is the director of music and Mr. Schwartz serves on the board of trustees.

Mr. Schwartz wanted to save some AIDS orphans in Africa, and he believed that God had given Christians a unique opportunity to be of service. He began praying with a group of Mount Zion members about whether the church should found an orphans' home. He believed that the church's international interests (last year it spent 47 percent of its income on missions) and orphans (30 families in the church of 650 attendees have adopted children) would help it catch the vision. He went to the church missions committee and asked for \$20,000 in seed money.

He wasn't surprised when the initial response was negative. The year's money had already been allocated



and he had only a vague idea for the home, not a plan. But, instead of giving up, Mr. Schwartz went to the trustees and reminded them of a promise made by pastor Craig McLaughlin: The sanctuary would get air conditioning only after the congregation built a church in Africa. When the trustees agreed to allocate \$20,000 from the building fund to the project, the missions committee replaced those funds with its own and found \$30,000 more to add.

Just before Thanksgiving in 2001, Mr. Schwartz met with the Minks, veteran missionaries whom Mount Zion had long supported. When Mr. Schwartz shared his vision of an orphanage, he found that Mrs. Mink, a registered nurse, had been nurturing the same vision for 20 years. Suddenly the question of who would run such a home was answered, leaving the where and the how still an open question.

The Minks returned to Africa, overcame work permit difficulties, and received permission to stay in Namibia. In January 2002, four Mount Zion members traveled to Africa and discovered a village family offering to give an orphanage a 99-year lease on 17 acres along the Zambezi River. That generous offer required a daunting set of approvals, both from tribal authorities and the national government, a process that could have taken a year—but within three weeks Mount Zion had its permits.

By the end of 2002 the Minks had cleared the land and overseen the construction of the children's home, which cost about \$200,000. Rebecca, after obtaining certifications to operate an orphanage and school, formed a local board of directors and developed relationships with the local social welfare agency and courts, which would be referring children to the home. On Jan. 17, 2003, local villagers and dignitaries attended the home's official dedication ceremony.

Relying on a combination of paid and volunteer staff made up of Africans and Americans, the home provides shelter, medical care, clothing, and schooling for the children—and food for chickens, goats, and horses—at a cost of about \$11,000 per month. The church is enthusiastically paying that and has also set up a special fund to pay for medical emergencies. The Minks raise their own support from 50 churches and many individuals.

What has the church gained from its investment? Here's a day in the life of the Children of Zion home:

Early in the morning seven boys in the Micah room are sleeping within mosquito nets, and others sleep in rooms named David, Timothy, Job, and so on. They (and girls in the other wing of the orphanage) will soon awake and wash up in the Sea of Galilee room; their dirty clothes will go to the Jonah room with its washing machines.

All the children (except the very youngest) go to their daily farm chores. One week the job of 11-year-old Albert, the formerly enslaved boy who had lived in a tire, was to milk a goat—but one day he forgot to take in the milk. The next day he discovered the spoilage and wanted to cover it up by dumping the new milk on top of it. Another boy, though, said he should ask someone, and—filled with fear about the consequences of honesty—Albert finally agreed to do so. He received an admonition about responsibility but also praise for telling the truth.

After breakfast, American and African staff members sit on couches and chairs in the dining room for devotions. The loudest voices for a praise chorus come from the Americans, but when the singing turns to "Amazing Grace," the African voices take over, adding wonderful harmonies. On the walls banners proclaim that "Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16)" and depict "Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)."

The school-age children are grouped by ability and knowledge, not age; many of the kids had never been to school before they came to the home because they couldn't afford the fees (five dollars per term) or uniforms (the same amount). All classes are in English, and in volunteer teacher Jaime Bugaski's classroom 14 children crowded around two tables study the difference between possessive and personal pronouns. When the teaching turns to geography one boy, Martin, can name all seven continents and all four oceans.

In another room volunteer teacher Jessica Schwartz pulls rhythm sticks from a cloth bag and hands them to the four 3- and 4-year-old girls arranged in a circle around her. "Put them in the rest position," she says, setting an example by laying her own sticks down to form the top two sides of a triangle. The little girls lay theirs down also. "OK, ready position." She picks up her sticks and the little girls do the same. "Play." Jessica and the girls hit their sticks together. "Rest." They lay them down. "Ready." They pick them up. "Play." They hit them together. "Rest. Ready. Play." Jessica picks up the pace, and the little girls laugh as they try to keep up.

School ends at noon, and after lunch another volunteer teacher, Lydia Alder, sits on the sandy ground outside the home while two almost-teenage girls painstakingly plait her long blonde hair into tiny braids. They've been working on it during recess and free time for several days. The 3- and 4-year-olds try to braid another volunteer's hair. Since they haven't yet mastered braiding, they twist and tug at it, managing to tie some of it in knots.

At mid-afternoon an African vet wearing a lab coat cuts into a goat that died from unknown causes. He suspects tick fever. Older children stare as the vet skins and beheads the animal, draping the skin over a wheelbarrow and painstakingly explaining his actions. An assistant sorts through the pile of guts to produce stomach, kidneys, heart, and intestines. The vet cuts open each organ, using his scalpel to point out signs of disease.

Late in the afternoon Mark Chiyuka, a Namibian auto mechanic, teaches bicycle repair to five boys in the shade near a sandy drive. On a tarp are a few bicycle frames, flat tires, and a box of parts. Each afternoon the boys come and learn how to straighten fenders, adjust seats, tighten chains, and repair wheels. Mr. Chiyuka and the boys work side-by-side. He often pauses from his own work to answer their questions and resolve disputes. When two boys start to fight over a wrench, he says, "Don't fight. Why should you fight?"

Later a 15-year-old, Disco, puts on a CD and leads a group in an African dance. He stands next to Berina, the oldest girl, but the rest of the children are paired with others of the same sex. They move in a big circle, their feet mirroring their partners': two steps forward, center feet together twice, outside feet touching behind, inside feet together again, outside feet touching in front. The younger children's faces crease in concentration as they try to master the steps.

Not a bad substitute for air-conditioning a Maryland church.

One benefit of Mount Zion's sponsorship of the children's home is the ongoing relationship that has developed between members of the church and children in the home. Church members sponsor individual children, committing to monthly financial support and prayer. A bulletin board in the church features photos of each of the children and lists the church families that sponsor each one. Church members also volunteer as short-term missionaries, paying their own airfare and \$200 per month for living expenses while in Namibia. At least 40 members have volunteered so far for terms ranging from weeks to months. Some have made multiple trips, allowing them to witness the transformation in the children over the past three years.

Mount Zion continues sending volunteers to Children of Zion, but young Americans not connected to the church also come. They bring energy, enthusiasm, and dependable work habits to a place that can always use another set of hands in the nursery or kitchen or doing routine maintenance.

Volunteers have to be flexible: Their assignments, like the children's chores, teach or reinforce important character traits such as responsibility, honesty, diligence, and kindness. Volunteers learn to do whatever needs doing, and children learn that if they don't shut the gate the animals get out; if they try to round up the chickens by throwing stones, they may hit a baby goat and injure it. All learn lessons of life and death. During one week in June three baby goats were born, one adult goat died, and another took ill with "blue tongue" disease.

The horses—17 of them, refugees from the regime of Zimbabwe dictator Robert Mugabe, now live on the farm—are also a means of transformation. Children assigned to a particular horse for a month at a time have the task of feeding, watering, grooming, and riding their animals each day, and mucking out their stalls. Children whose heads don't reach the top of a saddle now confidently tend and ride them.

The therapeutic value of the horses seems well worth the \$300-per-month total cost for keeping them. They're also fun to ride, and on a Friday afternoon a dozen children were taking a riding lesson from a local woman who yelled at them "squeeze your bums" and "straighten your spines." The children in their black riding helmets, long pants, and tennis shoes looked to be in a dressed-down version of National Velvet as they rode English-style in close formation around the ring.

What to make of all this? It may not take a village to raise a child, but Children of Zion Village shows that it took a church to build an orphan home. If Benedict Schwartz and other Mount Zion members had not acted, many of the Children of Zion 52 would still be homeless—some barely surviving as slaves or street urchins—and others would probably be dead.

Could other churches go and do likewise? Craig McLaughlin, pastor of Mount Zion, stressed that his church did not instantly spend 47 percent of its budget on missions, but started at 10 percent, then moved to 20, then 30 percent. He said the church made hard choices: "It's a big chunk of money that would be used to increase the size of the staff," but the message sent to the world is, "Here's a church that's proclaiming the gospel and trying to reach out to the lost and lowly." Those who wanted air conditioning got it—after the church funded the Namibian children's home.

There's more: Mr. Schwartz also noted that Mount Zion "is currently pretty maxed out in our current seating, even with three services . . . the caring spirit that Jesus manifests in the body touches people." Mount Zion has a policy of not going into debt, but recently the church received a bequest that will provide primary funding for a new sanctuary. (Does Matthew 6:33 come to mind: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"?)

Skeptics might dismiss the efforts of one church as a puny response to a massive crisis, but if other churches, presbyteries, synods, conferences, Christian colleges, and parachurch organizations follow Mount Zion's lead, they can bring challenging, personal, and spiritual help to millions of African orphans.

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