

## Events & News

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### Hope for Grieving Children – Zambia



At first glance, Laweyer, Ruthie and Mary appear like any other child in the southern African nation of Zambia. But, closer observation shows signs they are not so "normal." Nine-year-old Laweyer can't focus his thoughts in school, and often daydreams for hours at a time. At age 10, Ruthie regularly wets the bed. And, five-year-old Mary has trouble socializing with other children her age, going out of her way to avoid even the friendliest of encounters.

These children share a root cause of their unpopular behaviors: they were orphaned at a young age when their parents died of AIDs.

Until recently, 26 percent of Zambia's population was HIV positive. Even while the HIV infection rate is declining, the deaths of millions of Zambian people have left approximately 800,000 orphans without a parent, a bed, a home or a future. By 2010, the number of orphans in Zambia is expected to reach 1,000,000 - about half of all children in the country.

"Most people don't understand the impact of parental death on children," says The Rev. Dr. Richard Matteson, a clinical psychologist who started the "Hope for Grieving Children - Zambia" project as a way of addressing the psychological, spiritual and emotional needs of these orphaned children. "The loss of the parent is a permanent loss. It lasts forever. It's a lifetime grief. People have to understand that. Those who are going through it need to know that the people around them understand that and can respond to their needs."

But understanding is in short supply in Zambia. Most orphans are taken in by relatives or neighboring families. In fact, 46 percent of Zambian families have assumed responsibility for at least one orphan. These new caregivers struggle to provide basic necessities like food, clothes and education for the orphans. They don't understand the seemingly "bizarre" behaviors of the orphans - behaviors like isolation, depression, social withdrawal, regression, anger and passivity.

Caregivers repeatedly go to their church pastors, seeking explanations of why the orphans avoid contact with other children and do poorly in school. When caregivers are unable to cope with orphans' unusual behaviors, they sometimes abuse, neglect or even abandon the children to the streets to fend for themselves.



Historically, pastors were able to provide little specific help and guidance to orphans and their caregivers. But now, a grassroots effort to train and educate pastors on how to reach and support orphaned children is underway. Initiated by "Hope for Grieving Children - Zambia," 60 pastors serving about 300 orphans in each of their churches were trained in 2006. Soon, more pastors will be given advanced training so they can take the information to remote pastors in their native tongues.

A seed grant from Wheat Ridge Ministries provides materials and leadership for the training program and allows follow-up support as the pastors implement the training principles in their local churches. For example, pastors typically lead their own congregational training sessions to educate caregivers on typical orphan behaviors and appropriate responses. They also start support groups for caregivers and orphans.

"We now know emotionally where the orphans are, so we can relate to them," explains Pastor Mwaanga Mweemba, who is putting his training to work at his church. "We divide them according to age groups, and then we're able to use stories and drawings to help them. We help connect them with other children who have gone through a similar loss. There's a group dynamic so they understand this is not the end of life and you can move on."

"This project has gone further than other projects in the sense that it's meeting the needs of children spiritually and socially," says Lameck Siamalambo, the Zambian coordinator for "Help for Grieving Children - Zambia." "Many projects provide food or books, but they don't meet the other needs of the children."

Leaving these less tangible needs unmet will have far-reaching consequences for individual children and the country, as a whole.

"Being orphaned will affect children's output in life and their emotional and psychological development," adds Mwaanga. "We help them through the grieving process. From this direction, they move onto hope - a bright future - and move on with their lives."

Thank you for your part in creating a brighter future for Zambian orphans - like Laweyer, Ruthie and Mary - through your continued support of Wheat Ridge Ministries.

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