



How An
Annual Conference
Responded To God's Call

Feeding AIDS Orphans

Greg Jenks

I am an ordained pastor in the North Carolina Annual Church. I'm ashamed to admit that as late as the fall of 2001 I knew nothing of the suffering of orphans whose parents had died of AIDS in Africa. It was in the fall of 2001 that a fifteen-year-old girl in my church spoke to me of her burden for these suffering children.

A Teenager Hears God Speaking and Leads the Way

Amanda had always impressed me as a youth with deep spiritual sensitivity. However, I was still surprised on that autumn day to hear Amanda speak with amazing clarity of God's call upon her life to go Zambia the following summer to work with AIDS orphans. Little did I know the ramifications that vision planted in the heart of a youth would have for my own life and for the life of our annual conference.

In counseling Amanda I knew she faced two main obstacles to actually going to Africa . . . her mom and dad! In fact, her

parents both came to me separately asking me to speak with Amanda to explain to her why they couldn't allow her to go.

I understood their reservations. To allow a fifteen-year-old daughter to go on a mission into the bush of Africa, to a location where they would have no direct contact with her for two months, seemed a bit too much to ask of any parent.

So I did my pastoral duty. I explained to Amanda how God often reveals his will to us through our parents. I reminded her that honoring ones father and mother is part of discipleship. Then I assured her that I believed one day she would be in Africa, though it wouldn't be that next summer.

Amanda listened politely then disregarded absolutely everything I had said! Night after night Africa was the topic of conversation at the dinner table in her home. The turning point came one night when she looked at her dad and said, **"You're my earthly father and you're telling me no, but my heavenly Father is telling me yes."** Jim came to me and

asked, "How do I respond to that?" I replied, "I'm just glad she's your daughter and not mine!"

In the summer of 2002, Jim and Roberta Eckelkamp committed their fifteen-year-old daughter to the care of God. Amanda left the comforts of home to answer the call of God to serve suffering orphans in Africa.

Then God Spoke To My Heart

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Amanda's witness was to become the first of many seeds that God would plant in my heart over the next two years. Fittingly, it was among youth that God's call would become clear. While co-leading a mission trip to the Bahamas, I was leading youth from our church and from the community in evening devotions from the book of Nehemiah. Sensing that some of my youth might be dealing with a call into full-time Christian ministry, I sought to encourage them with the story of God's unlikely call of Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I told them,

“Nehemiah was the wrong person for the job. He wasn’t a contractor, he was a cupbearer. He had never even been to Jerusalem. But there were two things that happened. God put a passion in his heart for the people of Jerusalem. And he knew people would die if he didn’t go.”

It was on that starlit summer night in July of 2003 that God spoke to my heart. The message was simple and to the point. “Go take care of AIDS orphans in Africa.” I knew little about Africa. I knew even less about Africa’s orphans. I knew I was the wrong guy for the job. But I knew I was called. Confirmation of this call was soon to come.

I’ll never forget the moment when I first shared this vision with my district superintendent, Hope Morgan Ward, now the resident bishop of Mississippi. When I said, “I feel called to lead our annual conference in taking care of AIDS orphans in Africa,” her initial response was, “Can I go with you?”

Called to Feed the AIDS Orphans of Zimbabwe

Within three weeks Hope had arranged for me to take an exploratory trip to Zimbabwe. Joining me on this trip would be the missions coordinator for our annual conference, Steve Taylor, and Jim Eckelkamp, the father of the young girl whose passion had touched my heart.

This first exploratory trip took place in January of 2004. As guests of the Zimbabwe United Methodist Church, we set out to learn of the struggles of orphans left in wake of the AIDS pandemic. In doing that we also sought to discern God’s call upon our annual conference at this crucial moment of suffering.

It’s difficult to describe the horrors one sees when journeying among those whose lives have been shattered by the loss of their parents to AIDS. It’s heartbreaking to look into the eyes of a dying young mother who knows that soon she will leave her children to struggle through a childhood of suffering and loneliness.

The last night of that first trip to Africa, we visited in the home of the late Bishop Christopher Jokomo. He told a story that I never will forget. “A young woman I know became a prostitute. I

asked her, ‘Sister, why would you do this, why would you so degrade yourself, why would you become a prostitute?’ She responded, ‘My husband is dead. I have no skills. I have children I have to feed and put into school. Better to die of AIDS than to die of hunger.’”

Bishop Jokomo then remarked, “I didn’t know what to say to her.” Then he paused and looked at the three of us sitting on the couch across from him and asked, “How would you have responded?”

We couldn’t answer. We sat there in silence, each waiting for the other to respond.



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It was only after we returned to North Carolina that we realized that the answer really is quite simple. For those who follow Jesus it should be obvious. “Sister, we will feed your children.”

The Response of the North Carolina Conference

Through a movement called ZOE Ministry (The Zimbabwe Orphans Endeavor), the North Carolina Annual Conference has begun responding to the cries of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Kenya. Although established as an entirely faith-based ministry within our conference, in less than three years this ministry has grown from merely a vision to a movement touching the lives of over 16,000 children.

Amazingly, by simply telling the story of these children, ZOE has stirred the passions of believers across the North Carolina Annual Conference. Equally amazing is that although our initial vision was merely to be a mission from our annual conference, we now have partner churches in at least seven other states.

The work we do is simple. We provide food for hungry children. 16,000 children are fed regularly at our school feedings sites. We provide school clothing for children who otherwise would wear rags. We pay school fees to offer education and hope for children. Over 2,500 orphans have received school fees and uniforms. In 2006, physicians from the United States offered primary care services to 3,000 children. Children have come to faith in Christ through our Christian camps. This year we have launched an empowerment ministry designed to train orphans in life skills necessary to become self-sufficient.

Despite all we are doing we know it is not enough. Recently someone asked me what my ultimate goal was in terms of the number of children ZOE Ministry wants to reach. That’s a question that is impossible to answer. The people of Jesus can never feel the job is done if any child remains without hope.

How We Can Help More Children In Need

ZOE Ministry is available to assist annual conferences and churches respond to God’s call to care for the orphans and vulnerable children suffering in the wake of the AIDS pandemic. We are available for direct partnerships or to simply offer training in how to launch such an endeavor. We work in affiliation with the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund.

Today 6,000 more children will be orphaned because of the AIDS pandemic. **Today** Jesus is calling his people to embrace these children. The dreams and visions of a fifteen-year-old girl moved an entire annual conference. Will you dare to dream God’s dreams and see God’s vision for the suffering children of Africa? □

Photo courtesy of Greg Jenks