

CERI ministry in Africa pairing with groups to help orphans

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Dearing Garner,
director of
Children's
Emergency Relief
International-Africa,
and Angela
Namatovu, the 27-
year-old director of
Mercy Home for
Children in
Kampala, Uganda,
visit with some of
the 1.5 million
Ugandas displaced
by the long-running
war between the
Lord's Resistance
Army and the
government. The
children are
brutalized and often
forced to
participate in the
killing of their
parents. (Photo by
Trent Stiles)

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By Craig Bird

Baptist Child & Family Services

Dearing Garner found Blessings in Africa—and he expects to find ongoing blessings from assisting orphans in several African nations.

Garner, who retired recently after 27 years as pastor of First Baptist Church in Kingwood, leads Children’s Emergency Relief International’s expanding ministry to Africa. CERI, the international arm of Baptist Child & Family Services, already has ongoing work in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and Latin America.

On a recent survey trip, Garner said, “I met a charming baby girl in Johannesburg who was named Blessing—and was HIV-positive. Then in Otutulu, Nigeria, there was another beautiful orphan with the same name—and a large cyst on her head. When we arrived in Uganda, I would not have been surprised to find yet another girl with that name in the refugee camps along the Nile River.”



These Nigerian children are among 237 cared for by Daniel Edeh at the Ministry of Mercy. The orphanage is one of three new partnership being launched by Children's Emergency Relief International, the global arm of Baptist Child & Family Services.
(Photo by Dearing Garner)

What he found—by any name—were African-led ministries that matched the Texas Baptist agency's mission.

"First and foremost, we wanted to provide viable ministry to orphans—or as they are now called 'OVCs' (orphaned and vulnerable children)—who need someone to believe in them through longterm relationships. Second, we wanted to partner with national leaders who have God's heart for children. And third, we looked for ministries not already at the end of a Western mission agency's or non-government agency's pipeline. We are not looking for places we can go one time, take photos and leave. We want to repeat CERI's pattern in other countries of establishing and maintaining long-lasting, on-going relationships."

Though he found a match in all three countries, it was unexpected in South Africa.

"I went to Johannesburg to meet with (Texas missionaries) Scott and Ana Houser, but I really thought there would be nothing there that we were looking for," he acknowledged. "But the needs are just more hidden. You can find horrific slums six blocks from \$2 million homes."

When the Housers introduced him to Hannah Kitele, "I knew when I looked at her that she had the mind of God for the HIV-positive babies she has taken into her own home."

Kitele, a former Muslim who trained with Mother Teresa, had some minimal support that allowed her to hire two part-time helpers. but that funded ended in April. By the time Dearing and his traveling companion, Houston businessman Trey Stiles, headed for Nigeria, they had promised to secure the \$200 to \$300 a month the St. James de Chantal Home needed temporarily until permanent financing could be arranged.

In rural southeastern Nigeria, Dearing connected emotionally and spiritually when he met Daniel Edeh, head of Ministry of Mercy since 1992.



Children at Ministry of Mercy orphanage in Nigeria sleep on the floor, huddled together. Children's Emergency Relief International is organizing volunteers to provide medical and evangelistic care for them this summer.

(Photo by Dearing Garner)

“God gave him, at last count, 237 orphans—many of them handicapped—who call him Papa,” Dearing said.

Their biggest need is medical care and a balanced diet, he noted.

“There are cripples and children with TB; polio; ring-, hook- and round-

worms; yellow fever; and malaria,” he added. “In the last eight months six children have died.”

A church already meets on the compound, but the entire facility needs a security fence, kitchen and another dorm. There is no organizational support for Ministry of Mercy, but the children of missionary Caroline Gross—who started the work in the 1940s—provide some funds.

In Uganda, the Mercy Home for Children in the capital city of Kampala, founded and operated by 27-year-old Angela Namatovu has nice buildings provided by an Italian ministry.

“But they are on their back financially and struggling to put food on the table,” Dearing noted. “She cares for almost 130 children—mostly AIDS orphans. But at least one child came down with malaria every day we were there.”

Money pressures have not dimmed Namatovu’s vision.

“She feels the Lord leading her to work with the masses of children in northern Uganda who have been caught in the long-running civil war by the Lord’s Resistance Army against the government,” Garner explained. “An estimated 1.5 million people have been displaced, and the LRA captures children and turns them into soldiers. They are made to watch their parents slaughtered—and often forced to participate in the killings. And Western aid agencies have documented the terrible sexual and physical abuse they undergo. Even if they escape, they face tremendous emotional problems as well as the mere struggle to survive.”



A group of Ugandan orphans who escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army that terrorized the country north of the Nile River are on the hearts of Angela Namatovu and Dearing Garner. (Photo by Trent Stiles)

Namatovu took Dearing and Stiles across the Nile River to a mud-hut refugee camp of 1,100 people—many of them orphaned children—on the edge of LRA territory.

He says he “looked into those refugee children’s souls through their weary eyes—they have seen more atrocity than most adults and are hungry and need clothes. I pray that CERI can help Angela begin work among them too.”

CERI, “isn’t going to cover the whole continent,” Garner admitted. “But we can make a difference in the lives of the children we saw. If we can give them a childhood and a concept of a God who loves them, imagine what they can do for Africa? When a kid prays, it is powerful. When they pray, they can raise up a nation—and Africa will change itself.”

He is organizing volunteer teams for both Nigeria and Uganda this

summer. Plans for South Africa are still being developed. For more information, e-mail dgarner@cerikids.org , call (210) 787-0535 or visit www.cerikids.org.

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