

To see the face of AIDS in Africa, take a look at Susan

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By Scott Collins

Buckner Benevolences

NAIROBI, Kenya—A Swahili Bible rested gently on Susan's legs, a pencil in the crevice of the open book. Her left hand thumbed through the pages until it came to rest on Isaiah 40, her favorite passage.



40-year-old
Susan finds
comfort
reading her
Bible. She
accepted
Christ as her
Savior
through the
ministry of
the Baptist
Children's
Center in
Nairobi,
Kenya, a
ministry
supported by
Buckner
Orphan Care
International
and
Cooperative
Baptist
Fellowship.
She is one of
40 million
people
infected with
the HIV/AIDS
virus. (Photo
by Scott
Collins)

“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength,” she softly read aloud. “They will soar on wings like eagles.”

Slowly, she lifted her head and through sad but hopeful eyes told why she likes those verses: “I know that when I am weak, I will be lifted up. I will mount up like eagles.”

Susan knows weakness well. Like an estimated 40 million people worldwide, she has AIDS. And like millions of other Africans, Susan struggles daily with the effects of the deadly disease. Some are physical; others are emotional.

Married and divorced, Susan, 40, gave birth to three children—a son and two daughters, and she has two grandchildren. She moved from her village near the Tanzania border in rural Kenya to the bustling city of Nairobi in 1999.

In 2002, she started feeling sick and weak. For more than a year, she was completely bedfast. She suffered a stroke in 2003 that left her paralyzed on her right side. During that time, robbers beat her son to death. Illness prevented Susan from attending his funeral.

After several visits to the hospital, she learned she has AIDS. Almost immediately, she started taking anti-retro viral medications.

The regimen of drugs slowed the progression of the AIDS virus and helped Susan regain some of her strength. But the treatment is expensive, and she relies on free medicine from a nearby Catholic clinic.

“I was very confused and scared when I found out I had AIDS,” she recalled. “I had counseling, and that helped a lot.”

And while the medicine helps Susan regain her strength, she remains unable to work. Her right arm hangs loosely from her shoulder, useless

since the stroke. She lives in a small room that belongs to her mother, an arrangement Susan calls “temporary.”

Daily life is a struggle, emotionally and physically. There never is enough food, and she worries about the day when she no longer will be able to stay with her mother.

Still, she remains steadfast in her faith.

“The word of God keeps me safe,” Susan said. “I live with hope because of the Bible. The Bible helps me know that I am a forgiven person. Because I am forgiven, when I die, I know that I will live again.”

Hope of eternal life is something Susan found at a Baptist church, just a few hundred yards from the room where she lives. The church is located on the campus of the Baptist Children’s Center, a ministry supported by Buckner Orphan Care International.

Tony Wenani, the center’s manager, also serves as pastor of the church.

And even though Susan struggles to walk, Wenani said, she faithfully attends services at the church. Still, her disease is not something Susan talks about openly, even with church members who support her. Like so many infected with AIDS, she fears the stigma accompanying the illness.

Inside the room she calls home, posters and stickers attest to her Christian faith and the determination she shares with others to overcome the scourge that is AIDS.

A poster hangs on the wall above her favorite chair where she reads her Bible. It reads simply, “Together we can beat AIDS.”

Round stickers with red letters dot the walls, quoting Bible verses of hope, such as, “Leave all your worries with him, because he cares for you.”

“Even if you are not sick, you are going to die,” Susan said quietly as she looked down at her open Bible. “What matters is the word of God.”

She lifted her head. Her right eye drifted aimlessly to the side, unable to see since the stroke. Her left eye fixed intently on her visitors, looking at them, but strangely past them.

“I was born one day, and one day, I must die.”

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