

Pure Religion: Volunteers export hope to African orphans

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Residents of the
Baptist
Children's Center
in Nairobi tell a
Buckner
International
team
"asante"—Swahili
for "thank you."
(Photos by Ken
Camp)

Pure Religion: Volunteers export hope to African orphans

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

NAIROBI, Kenya—Peter sat shoulder-to-shoulder with other children on a bare wooden bench. Like his classmates, he was dressed in blue and white—the uniform of the Kariobangi Baptist Youth Center.

The children's uniforms were anything but uniform. Some students wore blue and white checked shirts or dresses. Others wore blue and white stripes. In spite of the warm day, others wore sweaters—often frayed at the cuffs and neckline—in varying shades of blue.



Children join in Bible study and worship at the Munyao Memorial Baptist Chapel on the campus of Nairobi's Baptist Children's Center.

But the students were uniformly bright-eyed and smiling, in sharp contrast to the many toddlers, children and teens who aimlessly roamed the streets of the surrounding Korogocho slum.

Children at the youth center come from Korogocho, one of six clearly identified slums in Nairobi. Estimates of its population range widely from 350,000 to 600,000. It's hard to count people who don't have homes, and hard to keep track when scores die daily from AIDS, tuberculosis and other diseases, observers noted.

Visitors with a Buckner International mission vision team brought students at the Kariobangi Baptist Youth Center large duffels filled with new sweaters in assorted sizes, as well as a variety of school supplies. But upon their arrival, the volunteers from Texas and Tennessee received disappointing news.

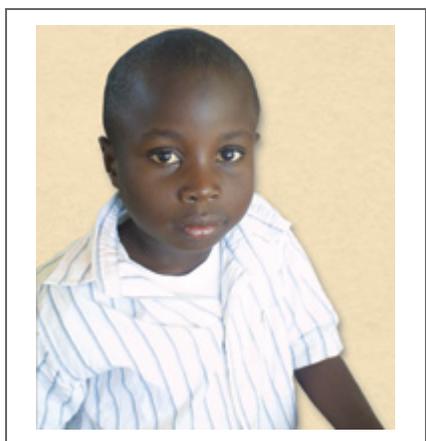
They brought more than enough sweaters and supplies for the 60 children known to be enrolled in the center's classes, but when the team arrived in February, 210 children filled the center's cramped wooden buildings.

The enrollment exceeds what the center can accommodate comfortably, but administrative director Euticauls Wambua Nzengu—better known as “Pastor Eutyclus”—finds it hard to turn children away when their needs are so great.

The mission team sorted sweaters by size while Pastor Eutyclus selected a representative group of children who immediately—and discreetly—received their prized new sweaters. Others would receive theirs as soon as a shipment could be directed to the center.

When Jay Abernathy, pastor of First Baptist Church in Palestine, led a devotional for the mission team earlier that morning, he mentioned it was his birthday. Sorting sweaters in a dark room and helping a child try one on for size, he remarked, “I can't imagine a more meaningful way to spend the day.”

Abernathy and 14 other Baptists from the United States participated in the 10-day mission vision tour of Kenya and Ethiopia at the invitation of Buckner International President Ken Hall.



The Buckner
International missions
vision team found their
reason for traveling to
Africa in the eyes of
Kenya's children.

Buckner, a 130-year-old children and family services agency related to the Baptist General Convention of Texas, has worked since 2002 in Kenya—home to about 1.7 million orphaned children.

Through a merger with Bright Hope ministries, Buckner is expanding its operations in Ethiopia, a Sub-Saharan nation with about 4 million orphans—about 500,000 of them affected by HIV/AIDS.

“I want you to see what is being accomplished in Kenya and what we have the potential to do in Ethiopia,” Hall told the group.

The team began their trip with a visit to the Baptist Children's Center in Dandora, an impoverished area in eastern Nairobi. The center is a 13.5-acre complex that includes a 48-bed residential facility for orphaned and abandoned children.

“Most have been orphaned because of AIDS,” said Dickson Masindano, director of Buckner's work in Kenya.

Most of the children—who often have been rescued from the streets—live at the Baptist Children's Center long enough to stabilize their lives and then move into foster care.

Masindano, an Ethiopian national who earned his master's degree in counseling from Hardin-Simmons University, developed the national foster-care system for Kenya.

In addition to the residential care for orphans, the Baptist Children's Center includes a school; a church, the Munyao Memorial Baptist Chapel; a medical and dental clinic; and a vocational and technical-training program.



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Tim Watson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Longview, preached at the on-campus church the Sunday the missions team visited, and he joined other volunteers in leading crafts activities for the children that afternoon.

"One of the highlights of the whole trip was seeing the joy of the children at the BCC," Watson said later. "Knowing just a bit about their stories and what brought them there, it was wonderful to see them so full of joy and

knowing their lives were changed.”

A couple of days later, the mission vision team visited the Kariobangi Baptist Youth Center in Korogocho. The center provides primary education—pre-kindergarten through fourth grade—for children from the slums. It also offers the children a hot meal at noon—the only meal most are guaranteed any given day, Pastor Eutyclus noted.

The Oaks Baptist Church in Grand Prairie has begun construction on a stone dining hall that will replace the small wooden cooking shed currently used.

First Baptist Church of Lee’s Summit, near Kansas City, Mo., is making plans to work with Kids Heart Africa—a partnership involving Buckner and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship—to construct additional buildings at the center.

In addition to the school for children, the center also provides teenagers and young adults with vocational training programs—hairdressing for women and woodworking for men.

Before the Buckner group left the center, someone asked Pastor Eutyclus how they could be most helpful to him.

“Keep coming,” he replied. “Your presence brings us so much hope.”

Next, the Buckner team visited the New Life Home for abandoned babies in the Kilimani area of Nairobi. Buckner does not sponsor the New Life Home, which is affiliated with Barnabas Ministries, but it has a close working relationship with the home. Some children who aged out of the home for babies have moved to the Baptist Children’s Center. Buckner, in turn, has referred infants to the New Life Home and provided limited financial support.

Sick and malnourished babies often are abandoned by parents who cannot care for them. The New Life Home admits infants up to 6 months old, with priority given to those who are HIV-positive.

By weaning the babies off tainted mother's milk, giving them a high-protein diet and providing the proper medication, the home has seen a sero-reversal rate of about 90 percent among more than 260 HIV-positive babies admitted in the last eight years, the Buckner group learned.

The Buckner team members cuddled babies and played with toddlers at the New Life Home—a welcome respite after witnessing such suffering in the Korogocho slum, several volunteers noted.

“I wanted you to see here what we want to do in Ethiopia,” Hall told the group.



Children at the Kariobangi Baptist Youth Center in Nairobi, Kenya, come from the streets of the city's Korobocho slum area.

Buckner is building a three-story temporary home for orphaned and abandoned babies in Addis Ababa—one of several ministry sites the mission team visited when they flew from Kenya to Ethiopia.

When the mission vision team arrived at the airport in Addis Ababa, Getahun Tesema from Bright Hope and a representative from the Ethiopian president's staff escorted the group through customs.

The next day, the group traveled by bus one hour from the capital city to Bantu, a rural area where President Girma Wolde-Giorgis has given 10.2 hectares—about 25 acres—to Buckner to build a community development center.

The eight-building campus envisioned for the village—the president's hometown—includes a school offering education from kindergarten through eighth grade. Like the Baptist Children's Center in Nairobi, the center in Bantu also will serve as a location to hold church services and provide a variety of community services, including educational programs to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Buckner/Bright Hope also will have access to an existing—but largely unused—government-owned health center where volunteer teams can provide medical and dental services.

During a dedication service in Bantu that made national news broadcasts in Ethiopia, Wolde-Giorgis set a plaque in concrete in the cornerstone of the community development center's first building.

Hall announced Bright Hope was merging with Buckner as an Ethiopian-led ministry, received title to the land and pledged construction would begin using local labor as soon as building materials could be secured.

"In accepting the title to this land, we give it back to the children of Bantu," he said.

Tesema hopes the community development center in Bantu can become a model that will be replicated elsewhere. He told the Buckner team his dream is to see 20 centers in 20 districts within 10 years, benefiting up to 1

million children and youth.

When the group returned to Addis Ababa, Tesema showed them the three-story baby home under construction in the western part of the city. The home will accept abandoned and orphaned children up to age 3. Buckner will have an adoption office at the home, handling both domestic and international adoptions, he explained.

The mission team also met a group of foster children and their caregivers. Tesema explained Bright Hope's philosophy has been not only to get children off the streets and into the homes of Christian families, but also to help those families become self-sufficient by offering micro-enterprise loans to help them start small businesses.

The Buckner team also saw an inner-city vocational training ministry—a vital ministry in an area where 80 percent of the people lack stable employment. In the front part of the small facility, cobblers learn to make shoes. In a larger room at the rear of the building, women learn to sew.

"Some of the women used to be prostitutes," Tesema said. "Some are destitute mothers who have been living on the streets."

All of the ministries of Bright Hope—and now Buckner—in Ethiopia have the blessings of the nation's executive branch. In fact, Wolde-Giorgis insisted on holding a reception and state dinner at the presidential palace to honor the visiting Buckner mission team.

Buckner team member Kyle Henderson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Athens, compared the situation in Ethiopia to the Old Testament story of Daniel, where God's representative found favor in the court of a nation's ruler.

"This seems like a historic opportunity in Ethiopia," Henderson said. "The president of the country has opened the door and handed us the keys,

inviting us into his country. This is a pretty pivotal moment, and I believe we will be judged by how we respond to that open door.”

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