



Community-Based Orphan Care

Africa Models a New Approach to its Orphan Crisis

STEVE ROA

How do you take care of 15 million orphans and children at risk? This is Africa's challenge, and it's not just a problem for governments, NGOs and Oprah Winfrey. Most of Africa's orphans are from Christian communities, confronting the global Church with one of the greatest humanitarian crises it has ever faced.

The traditional approach to this situation is to build tens of thousands of orphanages. Some are certainly trying to do this, among them many notable Hollywood celebrities. But the enormity of the challenge has forced others to rethink the traditional approach. The result may be something which is far superior to the institutional model, and which may actually help bring about change around the world in orphan ministry.

Seeking Cultural Appropriateness

In most African societies, institutional arrangements are the exception rather than the norm. Institutional care is a Western invention which we have created to replace traditional family care. This has resulted in a clash of values and understanding between good-willed Westerners and those we are seeking to assist in the developing world

One of the ironies of much of the world's orphanages is that most of the children in them are not orphans. For example,



Steve Roa is Director of Strategic Relationships for William Carey International University. He is also a researcher of agency internationalization initiatives for the U.S. Center for World Mission, and a consultant in the area of indigenous vs. Western-centric mission paradigms. Contact him at steve.roa@uscwm.org

recently a missionary came to visit us at the U.S.

Center for World Mission and he was telling our staff of his new orphanage which was now caring for fifty children.

We asked how many of these children were really orphans—children without parents. A little embarrassed, he replied, “Well, none.” So why call it an orphanage we asked? His reply was as pragmatic as it was revealing, “Because if I don't, no one will give!”

What typically takes place in institutional models of orphan-care is that the quality of life is far superior to anything on the outside. When that happens, parents are sometimes tempted to give their children up to the orphanage so they may have a better economic chance in life. (Americans will not soon forget the missionaries who were arrested for trying to take “orphans” out of Haiti following the earthquake of 2010. Turns out the orphans had parents, and the missionaries were violating the law!) The problem with the institutional approach is that it gradually begins to isolate young people from their communities, creating a sub-culture with an inevitable identity crisis. Ironically, Americans have done away with orphanages in their own country because of the many problems they create. Yet we unquestionably continue to use this problematic model around the world!

Why might that be? One reason is because we intrinsically think our way of life is best and in order to export it we have to create institutions to do it. In this sense, orphanages are just as much cultural institutions as they are structural. For example, last year a group of Christians came on a short term mission trip to Northern Uganda



and visited an orphan community. They were shocked that the only bathroom available to the orphans was a hole in the ground. So they promptly went to work to raise money for toilets. However, they were even more shocked to learn that the orphans wouldn't sit on the toilet seats after they were installed. Instead, they stood on them. The orphans explained that squatting is much more sanitary than sitting on a seat where everyone else has sat!

Now while this may seem like a small and comical incident, you have to multiply this by a thousand when you import a cultural institution like an orphanage to Africa. Fortunately, the magnitude of the AIDS orphan crisis has outpaced the ability of Westerners to build such institutions, and as a result a healthy partnership is emerging between orphan ministries and affected communities. The traditional way that Africans have cared for orphans is through the extended family network. So why not work with communities and empower them to take care of their own orphans? Such an approach has come to be known as "community-based care," and this model has successfully cared for many more orphans than the institutional model will ever be able to touch. Even so, a great deal more money continues to be sunk into the institutional approach, which requires land, buildings and full time staff.

Another model which is gaining prominence in Africa is the "child head of household." In this model an older sibling, usually a teenager, takes care of his or her brothers and sisters, and keeps the family unit intact. Many NGOs are coming alongside this model and adding mentoring and support to bolster it. Why would orphan ministries want to work with this? Studies have shown that keeping siblings together dramatically reduces emotional distress, as opposed to dividing up the children among relatives or institutionalizing them. Such a model can also serve to carry on the family name, as well as maintain family rights and land inheritance.

Africa vs. America

Last year I visited a self-organized association of widows in Uganda, which included around 450 members. At this particular gathering there were around 50 in attendance. During our Q&A time together I asked them the following question, "If you could have one wish come true, what would it be?" The first widow to respond said she wished for a house (a traditional African thatched roof and circular mud hut). Upon further inquiry I learned that no men were left in her family who possessed the capability to build her one. She said her greatest desire was to provide proper shelter for her orphaned grandchildren. Now this got me curious. What was she doing caring for orphans when she herself qualified for convalescent care had she been in America? She explained that because of

HIV/AIDS and the war, many widows have been left as the last remaining family member to care for the orphans. My curiosity peaked and I asked the group how many of them were caring for orphans. Most raised their hands. Then it dawned on me—by providing shelter security for the widow—you also shelter the orphan.

Another widow raised her hand so she could be recognized to share her one wish. She wished for vocational training assistance and/or micro-enterprise assistance in order to generate additional income. Imagine that! Here I was in the presence of these dear saints—the poorest of the poor in this community—and the primary thing on their minds was not a free hand-out, but rather a hand up. Their desire for vocational training was for the purpose of sending their orphan children to school, and for creating a self-sustaining family unit.

In this same community was the news that a very famous American evangelist was soon to erect an orphanage nearby. I visited the proposed site. It was huge, and knowing what I know about similar types of projects, this one was going to be lavish, sparing no expense. It would have all the amenities and comforts of a Western vacation resort, but exclusively for children. And this is the dilemma. What will this widow grandmother do—struggle to keep what remains of her family intact or release her grandchildren to an institution? Most likely, she will end up doing the latter, along with the others in the community. Unfortunately, at that moment, her grandchildren will be truly orphaned in every sense of the word—from their family, culture and community.

Some Friendly Advice

As more and more churches and individuals begin to get directly involved in orphan-care around the world, it will become increasingly important to learn from those who have gone before us. Seek out good counsel and do your homework. Don't be tempted by fame or adulation for saving the poor or the world—that is deception. Be willing to put your pride aside and consider the time-tested, proven methods of others. If you don't know where to begin, two ministries with a proven track-record are World Vision and the Firelight Foundation. No one organization has been caring for children at risk longer, or has invested more resources in Africa towards this cause, than World Vision. Additionally, no one organization is better recognized for their support of entrepreneurial community-based organizations (CBO) than Firelight Foundation. Of course, there are many other good organizations, but this is a good place to start. Initiate the conversation, read their material, consider partnering with them—and build on what you learn. f