

Making a Missionary Mark on Africa

Words and images by Katti Gray

On the road to Mtunthama Orphanage there comes a point when paved asphalt recedes into rock-hard, ruddy-blond dirt. The dust of it rises faintly as a two-car caravan, with Bishop Charles Blake as its chief passenger, wheels toward Mtunthama's wide open front door. The sun shines high in a translucent Malawian sky. It beats hard against this building made of red brick and thatched roofing, utterly jam-packed with infants, preschoolers, primary schoolers, near teens, their scant belongings, chairs and beds and classroom desks.

To the left of the doorway hangs a banner of welcome for Blake, pastor of celebrity-studded West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles. A chorus of children, often shoeless, and the adults who supervise these AIDS orphans is lifting a sacred song in Chichewa, the national language of multilingual Malawi. The singers stomp and clap a greeting to Blake. They embrace the bishop as if he is a far-off father arriving home again.

If an air of paternity hovers here, it is suffused with an understanding of what Blake, his lieutenant clerics and lay parishioners have invested in this country through Save Africa's Children, a non-denominational philanthropy launched out of West Angeles COGIC.

"We are children of Africa," Blake says. "If we don't care about Africa, how can we expect anyone else to be concerned?"

The advent of Save Africa's Children is but one marker in what is a relatively recent but historic surge of endeavors formed and fueled by a far-flung network of African-American churches, both mega and modest in size, on behalf of Africa. It is a movement abetted by the growing affluence of a

subset of African Americans, says the Rev. Dr. David Goatley, secretary-treasurer of Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention in Washington, D.C. "People are concentrating now on more than just making a living, a college education, leisure travel ... Churches are becoming better able to engage in much larger ways internationally," Goatley says. He also is day-to-day director of Lott Carey, which consults with mission-minded congregations.

Their models of Africa-focused charity are varied.

The Rev. Dr. Leslie Braxton's Seattle congregation, the re-named New Beginnings Christian Church, partnered with Scenery Park National Baptist Church in South Africa's less-traveled Eastern Cape, fully underwriting construction of its new facility and regularly donating to its community outreach programs.

Fountain Baptist Church in Summit, New Jersey, donated \$500,000 to "Home of Hope," an in-patient treatment center and halfway house for recovering substance abusers, male and female prostitutes in their teens and 20s in Cape Town, South Africa. Fountain, which also is paying tuition for school kids in Kenya, has sought as well to ensure a more equal, transcontinental exchange of ideas and talents, ferrying to Fountain the pastor/executive director of Home of Hope, an outgrowth of Teen Challenge, and some of its clients. They shared with the New Jerseyites some details of how Capetonians were, with South African police also intervening, curbing gang-related forced prostitution.

From Dallas, Bishop T.D. Jakes' Potter's House not only is convening its annual Megafest spiritual and personal development jamboree in Johannesburg in October 2008, but it has devoted itself to physical projects such as digging water wells in reaches of the continent where locals were hauling it, kilometer upon kilometer, because their own villages lacked the resources to tap underground reservoirs.

"People are people all over the world. They have similar needs for survival," says the Rev. Ronnie Guynes, who oversees Potter's House foreign missions.

Five years ago, Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn began hosting South African schoolchildren for summers in New York City as part of its longer-range plan for more substantial development projects in that nation and elsewhere on the continent. (Several of the South African students have since been grafted into New York households, with the aim of earning a high school diploma from the United States.)

For their fourth annual trip to South Africa in summer 2008, Emmanuel travelers are slated again to assist at day-care centers, AIDS hospices or primary schools for the deaf, to renovate tumbledown shanties, to make daily rounds with home-health care workers serving the infirm in Cape Town and Johannesburg townships and so on. Beyond those efforts, architects, engineers



Los Angeles Bishop Charles Blake, the bespectacled founder of Save Africa's Children, confers with an administrator of Save Africa's Support Organisation in Kanengo, Malawi, a beneficiary of Save Africa's Children. In the foreground is one of the children Kanengo feeds, provides extracurricular programming, shelter and other services.

and construction workers from Emmanuel will fan out to the strikingly underdeveloped Eastern Cape to lay the groundwork for building new homes for South African families.

Post-apartheid, black South Africa has bounded up the development ladder but, in many areas, still goes wanting. "Jesus said, "I must work the work that is within me, while it is day," says the Rev. Anthony Trufant, Emmanuel's pastor. "We're not coming [to Africa] with the intent of proselytizing. We're sharing our witness through our work ... thinking globally and acting globally."

Emmanuel member Ernesha Webb, a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University and public health administrator for the City of New York, spent five months starting in the summer of 2007 in South Africa training others and volunteering. At this writing, as Webb waits for South African immigration officials to approve a work permit that will allow her long-term re-entry into their nation, she is incorporating a U.S.-based non-governmental organization for which she is a co-founder.

Beyond donating one's money and/or volunteer sweat, what Africa demands is a level of professional and vocational mastery that decreases its reliance on outside benefactors. Imani Works/Faith in Action, her fledgling NGO, will target 25- to 45-year-old professionals with transferable skills, and a heart for Africa.

"We've thrown money at what we have defined as Africa's problems but not done nearly what we can do in terms of actual development there, individual and institutional," Webb says. "We need to connect what we've been able to achieve as African Americans to what Africans need. Like the Bible says, we need to teach a man how to fish for himself."

In a similar vein, Save Africa's Children is trying to import a Western notion that orphanages should be a secondary alternative for parentless kids. It aims ultimately to help AIDS orphans remain connected to families within a community, not be warehoused.

There is some distance to go in that effort, says social worker Rufaro Kangai, one in a small coterie of on-the-ground Malawian field workers — Save Africa's Children also has tapped workers in South Africa — receiving a stipend from the organization.

"What Save Africa's Children is doing here for the people — for free — is magic," Kangai says. "It is a miracle. It's support we desperately need."

New York City-based freelance journalist Katti Gray is a member of Emmanuel Baptist Church. Note: DeShong Smitherman, a producer at WTHR-TV in Indianapolis, and Cynthia R. Greenlee, a freelance journalist and Duke University doctoral student were named 2008 Ethel Payne Fellows.



An AIDS orphan at Mtunthama Orphanage in Mtunthama, Malawi, a facility underwritten by, among other charities, Save Africa's Children.



Mtunthama's young charges watch as a BET camera crew film Blake's visit.



An administrator at Masizakhe, a child-care compound in Nyanga Township, Cape Town, bids farewell to members of the foreign missions team of Brooklyn's Emmanuel Baptist Church by performing an ancestral South African dance and chant.