

mer u street children

By John Mollet



During my first trip to our Kenyan Village in 2012, I met a young boy on the streets of Meru. Meru is a busy place. It is a large town in which few have cars for transportation, so most walk. The streets are always filled with people. Our mission team had gone to the Makutano (Crossroads) area of town, listening to the evangelists we support share their witness in word and song.

I was standing on the roadside with a Kenyan pastor (also named John) listening to them, when a boy of about ten came up to us. He was obviously poor. His clothes were little more than rags and he was filthy dirty. He spoke only Swahili, so Pastor John knelt down to talk with him.

As they spoke it was obvious there was something wrong with the boy. Even speaking another language I could tell he had mental challenges. And there was something else: he had a bottle filled

with an amber colored substance in it. It hung from his mouth, his lips holding on to it. He would remove it only to speak.

Their conversation went on for a few minutes, and then the boy went on his way. I asked John who the boy was, what he wanted and if there was something wrong with him. John said he was one of the street children begging for food and money. His parents could no longer take care of him, so he was relegated to the streets.

He was addicted to glue. That was the amber substance in the bottle. John told me many parents give it to their children so they no longer have to feel the pangs of hunger.

As John continued to tell me the plight of these children, I watched a man chase this boy away, hitting him several times with a broom handle to keep him moving. As my eyes panned the street, I saw several other children with



amber colored bottles hanging from their mouths. I asked John, "How many of these children are in Meru?"

He said, "I don't know. There are a lot of them."

I responded, "What is the church doing to help them?" He only looked at me in confusion. "Have they just become a part of the landscape? Become invisible to society and the church?" I explained how that happens to us in the U.S. How we tend to close our eyes to the needs of those just down the street from us.

John answered, "Yes, and there are just too many of them to help."

It was at that point I knew this boy was not going to leave my heart until we were able to do something for the "glue kids" - these "Street Children." The next day Pastor John and I spoke to Bishop William. We agreed that he would look into the needs of the children and what programs might be available for them. He would report to our team that was coming on the next trip from Grapevine a few months later, and then again when I returned in a year.

Not much could be accomplished by the time our next mission team arrived in July. They visited a small program for the street kids in one of the local churches, but they were not able to see many of the glue kids during their trip.

When Bishop William transferred the responsibilities of his office to Bishop Catherine, he made her aware of our

interest in working with the street children. Catherine then took it upon herself to scout out these children and start building a relationship with them.

By the time our March mission team arrived in 2013, Bishop Catherine had discovered over 300 children, from infants to over twenty, living in two separate groups on the streets of Meru. She introduced our group to the children and out of that meeting has sprung an exciting new ministry.

Let me just pause here in the story to tell you that meeting with these children and youth was like living in the pages of the William Golding's book, *Lord of the Flies*. They live in an alleyway just off one of the main intersections in the city. It serves as a dump area for the businesses in the vicinity. They have no enclosures to live in, so they erect paper coverings to sleep under. The police pass through regularly to tear them down.

This group of children thinks of themselves as a family. They have a "chairman" and a hierarchy under him. The chairman's name is Zablon. He has a list of everyone



in the group with ages and notes on each. They protect and provide for ones who are unable to do so for themselves. When one of the girls in the group needed medical care, they pooled whatever money they could get their hands on to pay for her hospital bill. They were trying to help a few of the younger children to stay in school.

Don't get me wrong, these are tough, street-wise kids; abandoned, neglected or abused and forced to live on the streets. But they are all hoping for a chance at a better life.

We invited the street kids to meet with us at All-Saints Methodist Church about five blocks away. We had no idea how many would take us up on our offer. At first a few children came into the sanctuary of the church; then a few more. Finally, a bustling group of 75 sat in the church pews.

The kids told us about life in the streets; they even sang us a song about it. It was like their national anthem. Their needs were basic: food, shelter and education. Zablon told us the focus should be on the younger ones. They were still young enough to go to school and break the cycle of street life. The older ones needed help getting a job: interviewing skills, a place to shower and clean clothes to wear for interviews.

A few of the children stood out. Zablon is a natural leader, intelligent and articulate.

While waiting to come into the church, one of the boys started to preach. He had all the moves and inflections of a

preacher down pat. But as Mark Maness commented, we just don't know if he was mimicking the words or he believed what he was saying.

Carol Howe fell in love with Charles, the boy in the yellow cap with the sweet face. He latched on to her. We later found out he had been abused by his family.



The better life they long for is what we, in cooperation with the Kaaga Synod, the Methodist Orphanage in Meru and government leaders, are working to provide.

We have already started to provide lunch for the street kids three times a week at All-Saints Methodist Church. Our church is providing the funding for the food (\$500 a month) and All-Saints is doing the cooking.

The orphanage is beginning to evaluate the children to see if they are addicted to glue and willing to get off of it. They



are finding out if they can or should be reunited with their families or be placed in the orphanage. They will be attempting to get the younger children into primary school and the older ones in to trade school.

There are plans to help the oldest teenagers with clothing and skills for job interviews. I have just received this week from the Kaaga Synod the first draft of a proposal to Rotary International for a grant to help us fund the project. The Rotary Club in Meru will be joining us in that effort.

Here is what we have already learned from Kaaga Synod's work with the children:

- There are over 100 street children in Makutano.
- One boy from the streets has started school at Thuura Secondary School (Lawrence's school). We have paid for his first and second semesters.
- Some 20 children have expressed the desire to go back to school.
- 20 others, ages 16 and older, have said they would like to go to trade school classes.
- 15 are already attending polytechnic school supported by a government SOS grant.
- Two of the older children have been sent away from Kithoka Youth Polytechnic for lack of a proper uniform.

- 13 street kids already in school are in need of a place to stay at night.
- The older children not in school need help starting a small business to get off the streets. Ten among them have expressed their wish for a wheelbarrow so they can ferry goods to make a living.
- There are six girls in the Makutano group. One is expecting, one has two children and another has one child. These are families already living on the streets. The girls have expressed interest in going to school to become a hair stylist or a tailor.

There will be many ways you can help in this new ministry and we will keep you informed of those ways as they arise.

The first way you can help is to contribute to the All-Saint lunch funding. As I said that is a monthly cost of \$500. You or your family or your Sunday school class or your Bible Study group or your UMW Circle or Emmaus Reunion Group can help by contributing toward a month's expenses.

You can also provide funding for education or job support.

Or you can give to help the general project as it moves forward. In whatever way you help, I guarantee it will be money well spent. «



John has served as Senior Pastor of FUMC Grapevine since June of 2011. John has visited Kenya twice and is passionate about the ministries there. Read thoughts from John daily on the 10 & 10 blog.

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