

COMPASSION TODAY

FALL 2013

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SPARKING SMILES AT CHRISTMAS

Last year, you put smiles on kids from Mexico to India with a special Christmas gift.

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RAISING CHEERFUL GIVERS

Two experts offer advice on how best to encourage a spirit of generosity in children.

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FINDING TRUE LOVE IN A PLACE OF WAR

Witnessing God's power to multiply gifts and heal the broken in northern Uganda.

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COMPASSION TODAY

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COMPASSION CANADA

OUR MISSION In response to the Great Commission, Compassion Canada exists as an advocate for children to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Friends,

Whoever said time flies wasn't kidding. Not only are we celebrating Compassion Canada's 50th anniversary this year, but this October marks my 30th year with the ministry. I'm pretty sure someone's playing a trick on me—it seems like it was only yesterday that I started!

But what I really want to celebrate is you. For the last 30 years, I've seen God at work in so many ways, both in the lives of children and Christians here at home. I'm always encouraged when I see what happens when Christians "get" the vision of Compassion: they get creative! Children and teenagers collect bottles and make tasty treats. Writers share their experiences to inspire others. Musicians share their heart through song. And the vision gets passed along and inspires others to use their gifts on behalf of the poor.

That's something worth celebrating, isn't it?

Dr. Barry Slauenwhite
President and CEO
Compassion Canada

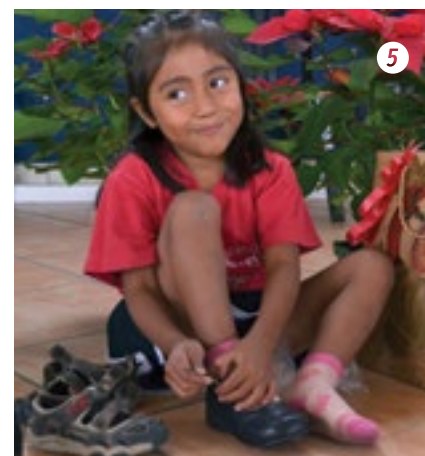
Sparkling Smiles at *Christmas*

Last year, you put smiles on kids from Mexico to India with a special Christmas gift—and you helped children in a remote village in Ghana celebrate Christmas for the first time ever! Here's a little peek into the smiles you sparked on Christmas.



- 1 Hilmer in Mexico got to bring a bucket of groceries and toys home to his family.
- 2 Sheikh in East India got a new backpack, clothes and a snooker set.
- 3 Marckenlove and Colby in Haiti got trucks and cars to play with.
- 4 Rosa, Melissa, Josseling and Angihim in Nicaragua got doll sets.
- 5 Eneida in Guatemala got a new pair of shoes.
- 6 Christabel, Esther and Kazia in Ghana got new clothes. In fact, these were the first gifts these girls ever received.

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THE FIRST CHRISTMAS IN ADUKRAM

By Vera Mensah-Bediako

IN the bigger cities of Ghana in West Africa, December buzzes with action. Families decorate trees in their courtyards with lights; carols are heard in all the busses and shops. People greet one another with “Afishiapa” —Merry Christmas. Children wait eagerly for gifts of new clothes and for feasts including their favourites—sodas and chicken.

And churches share the life-giving message that the Messiah is born.

But in Adukrom, December 25 passes like any other day.

Adukrom is a small village in the eastern hills of Ghana where most people survive as day labourers or subsistence farmers. Making just 50 cents a day, people can’t take the day off, but have to keep working. Children in Adukrom have never looked forward to any gifts or special meal for Christmas.

But in December 2012, children in Adukrom celebrated Christmas for the first time ever.

Two months before, the Adukrom Assemblies of God Child Development Centre was opened. Two hundred children were registered in the program and began receiving access to education, health care and weekly activities at the local church.



For Christmas, the children and their parents came together for a special Christmas celebration. They had a meal of fried chicken and jollof—a traditional dish of rice in a spicy tomato sauce. The older children performed dances, sang local carols and recited Bible verses. They also heard the message of how Jesus Christ came to earth to save us from our sins.

And many of the children received their first Christmas gift ever.

Boys received three-piece suits and girls received skirts and tops. Before buying the gifts, the parents came together with centre staff and all agreed the children needed new clothes most. In Ghana, it’s traditional for children to get a gift of new clothes at Christmas—special clothes that they’ll wear in the coming year.

Shy, eight-year-old Gifty Akakpo is one of eight children in her family. Her father

“I CANNOT UNDERSTAND THAT SOMEBODY SO FAR AWAY WHO HAS NOT EVEN SEEN GIFTY COULD LOVE HER SO MUCH...”

works as a day labourer and her mother washes clothes. The family lives hand to mouth, never sure if the parents will return home with food for that day’s meal. Gifty has never even thought of getting a Christmas gift before.

Her mother, Mary, buys clothes for her children only when absolutely necessary, and Gifty gets hand-me-downs from her older sister.

So Gifty will remember the Christmas she got a new outfit for the rest of her life. She arrived at the centre wearing a green and orange dress handed down from her sister, and she left with a new white skirt and top.

“When all the parents were invited to the centre to talk about a gift for the children and we all agreed on clothes, I did not think



■ Gifty showing off her new outfit.

that it was true until we were called again and my daughter was given a nice dress for Christmas,” says Mary. “I am very surprised and happy.”

Mary is overwhelmed with how the centre is helping her daughter.

“I don’t even know what to say. I cannot understand that somebody so far away who has not even seen Gifty could love her so much. And not only Gifty, but all the many children,” says Mary. “I say a big thank you to the people who sent money for the children to get new clothes this Christmas.”

Thanks to caring sponsors around the world, children like Gifty not only got their first presents, but are also starting a new phase in their lives—one filled with hope and purpose for their future. ✨

SHINE CHRIST’S LOVE *with the* CHRISTMAS GIFT FUND

Christmas is a time when we can shine Christ’s love into children’s lives—even more brightly than all the lights on the trees. Watch your mailbox for an opportunity to help give every child in Compassion’s care a little Christmas cheer with a gift through the Christmas Gift Fund.





RAISING CHEERFUL GIVERS

Two experts offer advice on how best to encourage a spirit of generosity in children.

By Amy Bennett

AS parents, we want our children to feel that they have plenty—enough to share. We want them to know the joy of giving, to demonstrate concern for others and feel the satisfaction of meeting needs beyond their own.

And yet all of us fight the inner temptation to live self-centred lives. The individualistic view of the culture we're immersed in doesn't help.

So what's the best way to instill a generous character in our kids?

MODELLING MATTERS

Children are natural imitators who mimic our behaviour, whether negative or positive. That's why it's worth making the extra effort to model generosity consistently in everyday life. Our kids will observe and copy our attempts, whether it's helping someone who has dropped their groceries, delivering baked goods to a friend or spending time with the elderly. They'll watch us give attention and respect to other people.

Mother, clinical psychologist and Tyndale University professor Amanda Azarbehi says, "The little things we do day to day are probably having a bigger impact on our children than saying, 'We're going to sit down and talk about generosity,' this one time."

WIRED FOR EMPATHY

Thankfully, it's not all up to us to instil this value. God has pre-programmed us to see other people's needs and experience their pain, Azarbehi adds.

Examining the brain with an MRI machine shows that a specific set of neurons—mirror neurons—light up when someone watches a video of a person getting hurt. We say, "I feel your pain," and

it's true. We empathize.

Kimberly Franklin, Dean of the School of Education at Trinity Western University in Vancouver and mother of two, agrees. Children are born looking beyond themselves, she says. Every child opens its eyes to see its mother.

"Children are already incredibly very generous. It doesn't necessarily have to be taught to them," Franklin says. "When they see needs or suffering, they have this natural desire to reach out and do something kind and generous like share a toy."

In fact, she says, our expectations of children's generosity can be too low. Children can exceed our understanding of what it means to be generous at certain stages of development.

"It's never too young to teach children our life is a gift that needs to be offered back."

Franklin recommends parents pay attention to moments when a child shows generosity naturally. These are opportunities to draw that quality out by affirming the behaviour.

NURTURING GENEROSITY

Azarbehi says children as young as one will start to share, and parents can encourage that behaviour with pictures or objects.

"In my children's Sunday School class, when they collect the offering, they show a picture of something the church is funding, like a water well," Azarbehi says.

Ask children, "What do you use water for?" Explain that yes, water is very important, but some people don't have it and we can give money to help them have water.

Older children have more capacity to

TIPS FOR TEACHABLE MOMENTS

1 Make generosity part of your family's natural language: "We're the Smith family – we help other people. That's part of who we are as a family."

2 Talk to your kids about how you tithe at church.

3 Allowance jars work well: a "spend it" jar, a "save it" jar and a "compassion" jar. From a \$3 weekly allowance, one dollar goes in each jar. You can talk with your child about what they might be able to do to help others with the money from the compassion jar.

4 Involve your kids in choosing a Christmas gift from Compassion Canada's "Gifts of Compassion" gift guide. Provide visuals: if you choose a chicken, find a small plastic chicken at the dollar store and put it in your child's stocking. It's something kids can show their friends—"Look at this chicken, I gave one to a family in Africa and now they have eggs."

5 Check out the "Generosity" lesson, part of Focus on the Family Canada's Kids of Integrity curriculum by Laurel Kirchner. See kidsintegrity.com.



Amanda Azarbehi

Clinical Psychologist & Professor
Tyndale University
Toronto, Ontario

"The little things we do day to day are probably having a bigger impact on our children..."



Kimberly Franklin

Dean, School of Education
Trinity Western University
Vancouver, British Columbia

"Children are already incredibly very generous. It doesn't necessarily have to be taught to them..."

imagine someone else's perspective, she says. The conversation can progress to, "What do you think it would be like if you had to walk five kilometres to get water?"

While Franklin wants her children to think about people living in poverty, she also wants to impart a generosity of spirit. Giving freely of ourselves can be more difficult than giving material things. It's a skill best learned in the family: "It's harder to be generous with your family—to not be annoyed when your family is in your space, but be willing to share it."

WHAT NOT TO DO

Avoid attaching rewards to generosity; for example, a child wins a water gun for raising \$50; a skateboard for \$500. While the incentive benefits the cause, the focus shifts from helping others to winning prizes. "It doesn't teach children to feel good about helping others."

Avoid praising the child herself, which can make the child feel she has to keep practising generosity to please people. Say, "What you're doing is good because it's helping this group of people," not, "You're a good person because you do this."

Avoid communicating a judgmental attitude. It can be easy to feel superior, thinking we know what is best for other people or that they lack the character to help themselves. But the blessing is in knowing that what we give wasn't ours to begin with, and by offering it to others we are giving it back to God.

WE'RE ALL RICH AND POOR

Franklin advises parents to help children see that everyone is both rich and poor.

"I'm sitting on a lake in a beautiful home with a beautiful view, but there is suffering and poverty in my life, too. My father-in-law is dying."

She recalls spending time with her son, then four, in Africa, where he could play outside more freely than he could in Canada. On the family's return home, his school launched a project to raise money for children in Africa. Having known only the peace and happiness of his African playmates, he raised his hand to say, "I've been to Africa and there are no poor children." ✨

GENEROUS KIDS



James Peggs, age 6
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

In his first copy of Compassion Explorer magazine (Compassion's magazine for kids), James Peggs read about 13-year-old Noah, who didn't want birthday presents. Instead, Noah asked his friends to donate money for soccer balls for Compassion-sponsored kids.

James was about to turn six. So he and his mom went online and chose a swing set for children in Rwanda. Then James invited 16 friends to his party. Together, they raised \$263—more than the cost of the swing set! James donated the extra money to a soup kitchen in his neighbourhood.



Katie Weeks, age 8
St. Catharines, Ontario

After reading about malaria, Katie Weeks wanted to help protect children from mosquito bites, which can spread the disease. She began raising money to buy 20 bed nets for children in Burkina Faso and India.

Katie made presentations at her school and church. Her Dad helped her set up a website called "Nets for Kids." In about two months, her total was well over \$1,000—enough to buy 135 nets. TVO Kids heard about it and gave Katie a Super Citizen Award. "I learned that little kids could make a big difference in the world," Katie said.

netsforkids.wordpress.com
www.tvokids.com/shows/supercitizensawards



Chris Cushing, age 14
Rusagonis, New Brunswick

Chris Cushing makes mouthwatering truffles, each coated in creamy chocolate and filled with one of many flavours. All the proceeds go toward safe drinking water for children in Tanzania.

Chris's goal is \$1,500 for a well and water tank. His formula? "Chocolate + Love = Water."

For Mother's Day this year, Chris made more than 20 dozen truffles in a week—in between classes, homework, fencing and swimming. Now, sales are up to 1,270 truffles since December 2012. That's almost \$900 toward a well and water tank.

www.truffler.ca
[@christruffler](http://www.facebook.com/ChrisTruffler)

Meet real needs and bring real joy with GIFTS of COMPASSION

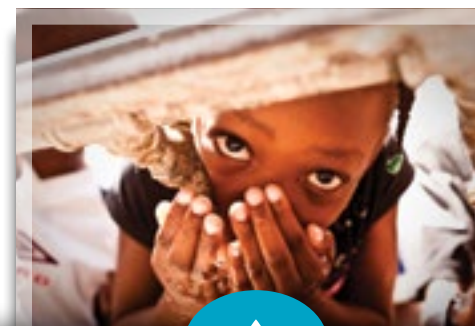
Last year, you made a huge difference with Gifts of Compassion—youth in Ecuador became shoemakers, disabled children in India got beds to sleep in, and a baby in Kenya even got heart surgery!

This Christmas, you have the chance to:



TRAIN MOMS IN INDIA TO BE TAILORS

Many moms in Tamil Nadu, India, are hard-working and want to provide for their kids. But in this poor area, many are illiterate, have no job skills and need to stay at home with their children. This gift will teach moms tailoring skills so they can earn extra money at home and help their families.



GIVE A WATER FILTER TO A FAMILY IN ETHIOPIA

In Karakore, Ethiopia, children gather water from the same river where animals do all their business. They end up sick and miss school. With this gift, a family will receive a Sawyer water filter and bucket—the easiest and most cost efficient way to provide a family with clean water.

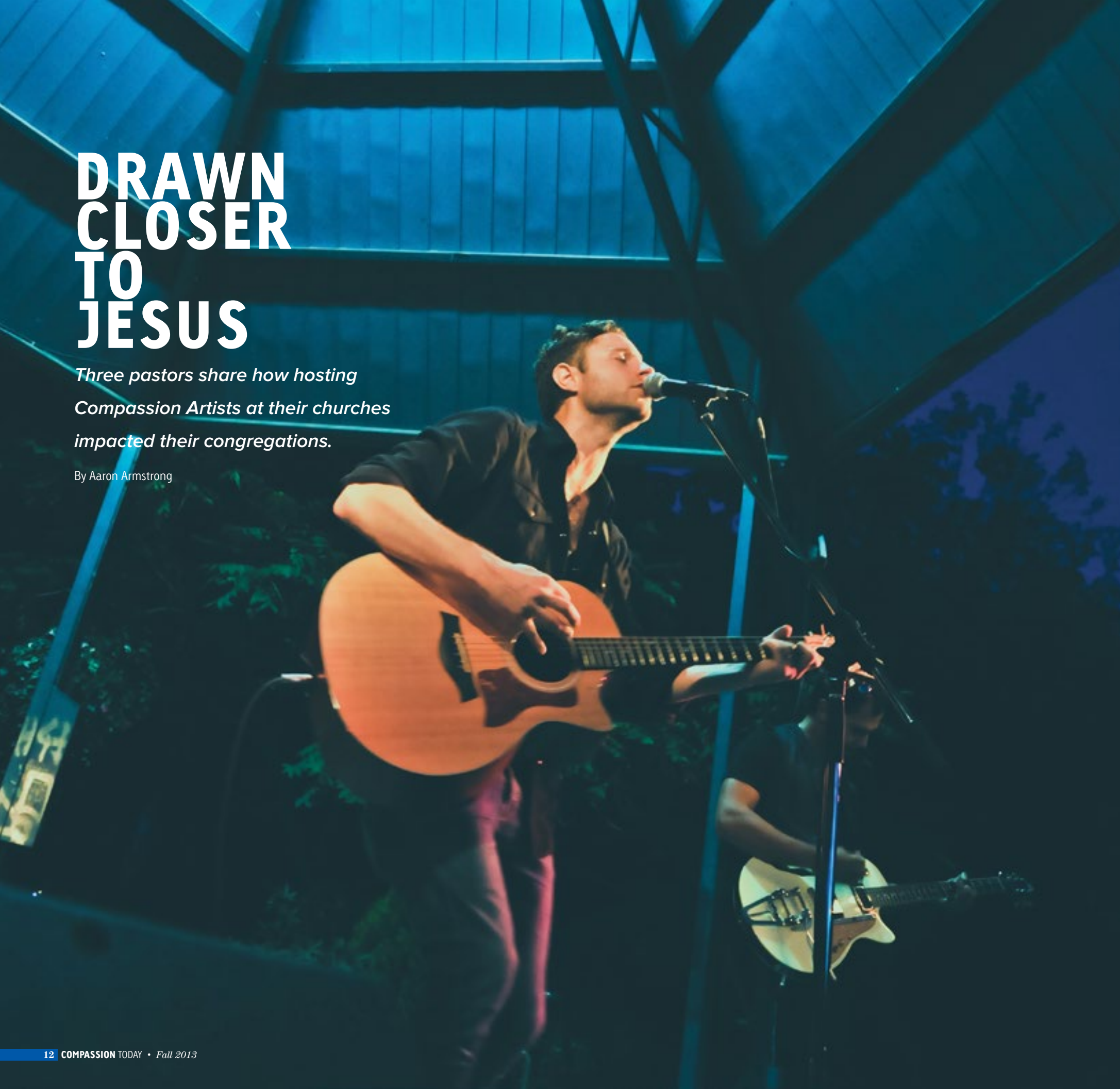


VACCINATE BABIES AND CHILDREN IN TANZANIA

One in three babies in Tanzania hasn't been vaccinated against diseases like whooping cough and tuberculosis—diseases they are at serious risk of living in extreme poverty. This gift will help babies and children receive the vaccinations they need to grow up healthy and strong.

Give a gift that meets a real need and
brings real joy to the life of a child.

CHOOSE YOUR GIFT TODAY:
www.compassion.ca/shop



DRAWN CLOSER TO JESUS

Three pastors share how hosting Compassion Artists at their churches impacted their congregations.

By Aaron Armstrong

a few times a year, I get an email asking if I'm interested in speaking at a men's meeting or preaching at a church on a Sunday morning. It's a great privilege and one I take very seriously, especially when I'm asked to talk about Compassion's ministry. I've learned a lot through my experiences to date, but I picked up on this fairly quickly: guest speakers polarize congregations. Some people welcome guest speakers warmly. Others are highly suspicious, certain the speaker is really only there for his own benefit. And when the speaker is representing an outside ministry? Oh my...

What is it about a guest speaker, particularly one representing another ministry, that puts people on edge? I wonder if it doesn't come down to fear. Specifically, fear that church that week is going to feel like an extended sales pitch. A commercial. No one wants sit through that, especially not at church.

So what's a ministry to do?

WIN-WIN

Rev. Laurel Buckingham is the recently retired pastor of Moncton Wesleyan Church, one of the largest congregations in Atlantic Canada, and a long-time supporter of Compassion Canada. He says ministries need to look beyond their own interests and pursue something "win-win."

"[Having a guest needs to] benefit all concerned; it's not just something that is being done for the sake of [one party]," Buckingham says.

That's what he loved about having a Compassion Artist visit Moncton Wesleyan in the spring of 2013. Compassion Artists are a group of musicians and speakers from across North America using their gifts and stories to serve the local church and bring awareness of Compassion's ministry. Although Buckingham was sold on Compassion's work, he wasn't sure if having a musician come to Moncton Wesleyan was the right thing to do.

"The idea of a Compassion Artist before you've ever had one is somewhat of an unknown," Buckingham says, "you don't

know for sure what to think."

For Buckingham, the highlight experience was their Easter, 2013, celebration. In much of Canada, Easter is one of the most highly attended days of the year, but in Atlantic Canada, attendance frequently drops. "We plan for the Easter weekend with some fear and trepidation," he says. "We have a holiday on Friday and most people have another holiday on Monday. A lot of people look forward to going away."

The leadership at Moncton Wesleyan planned what they hoped would be an incredibly effective weekend of ministry. And when they found out they could have a Compassion Artist it was, as he put it, "the frosting on the cake."

The weekend was more successful than he expected. "We had over 5,100 people in attendance," Buckingham says. "It had an incredible impact internally, as well as in the city, especially when people learned who was joining us." Joining their services that weekend was award-winning country artist George Canyon.

Canyon, a Compassion Artist since mid-2012, shared his testimony, telling those present about his experiences with Compassion and how God has been at work in his life.

The result: 221 people put their faith in Jesus Christ!

"His testimony was unbelievable," Buckingham says. "It was a powerful, positive and effective experience to see a lot of children sponsored for Compassion and it's done an awful lot for the impact of the church... it's truly been a win-win."

TELLING STORIES ABOUT GOD'S WORK AROUND THE WORLD

Mike Penninga, senior pastor of Kelowna Gospel Fellowship in Kelowna, British Columbia, had similar concerns to Buckingham. "To be honest when I first heard this concept of bringing an artist, I thought, 'How are they going to fit with the DNA of our church family?'"

Despite his initial hesitation, having a Compassion Artist come to the church was a great experience for everyone. In the time the church has been involved

with Compassion, they've had both Geoff Moore and Jacob Moon come to the church. But what was most compelling, he says, isn't their talents (which he says are "off the charts"), but their commitment to understanding Compassion's ministry. Moore and Moon are both deeply committed to Compassion—Moon even wrote a song about his sponsored child—and their love of the work and their sponsored children is an inspiration to their audiences.

"They have skin in the game. They share from personal experiences [visiting Compassion's ministry in the field] as opposed to stories they've read from somewhere else," he says. "That is genuine and authentic and real, and it connects with the people in our church."

"Having a Compassion Artist join us here was fantastic because of their level of authenticity, their genuineness, and their personal storytelling," Penninga says. "It was off the charts...and it was a wonderful way to help people catch the vision of Compassion and see the kingdom work around the world."

EXPANDING HEARTS WITH THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

Brad Watson, senior minister of Lakeshore St. Andrew's in Windsor, Ontario, was enthusiastic to have a Compassion Artist from the beginning.

"Anything we do with Compassion is a slam dunk," he says. "Our mission is to create small communities of Christ followers, following hard after God, and that just resonates with what Compassion's doing with us."

So for him, it wasn't a matter of "if," but of "when" and "who." The "when" was April, 2013. The "who" was recording artist and speaker Shaun Groves and best-selling author of *One Thousand Gifts*, Ann Voskamp.

"That morning really grew our hearts in worship," Watson says. "We really feel that worship is getting a bigger sense and vision of who God really is at heart and how he's made us.... I felt our hearts get bigger as a congregation."

Voskamp shared her journey of developing the discipline of gratitude



Laurel Buckingham

Retired Pastor
Moncton Wesleyan Church
Moncton, New Brunswick

"It was a powerful, positive and effective experience."



Mike Penninga

Senior Pastor
Kelowna Gospel Fellowship
Kelowna, British Columbia

"It was a wonderful way to help people catch the vision of Compassion."



Brad Watson

Senior Pastor
Lakeshore St. Andrew's Church
Windsor, Ontario

"It was the best ministry weekend in my entire ministry career."

and how it put her in touch with all the ways she was experiencing God's grace in her life. That led into her experience with Compassion. "She talked about Pastor Saul in Guatemala City, who had nothing and yet was making such a difference in his community," Watson says. "That really inspired our congregation. It reminded us that it's not about what we don't have, but what we do with what we already have that makes a difference."

Groves shared the story of a young woman, Karen, whom he met on a Compassion trip. "They were walking through these slums and streets where she lived," Watson says. "And at one point he turned and saw Karen was crying. He said to our congregation, 'What a dumb question to ask a teenage girl in a developing country 'what's wrong,' when everything is wrong?'"

"But she turned to him and said, 'Shaun, I'm not crying because I'm sad. I'm crying because I'm overjoyed, I'm happy!' Shaun asked her, 'Why are you happy?' And she said, 'Because I have God. I have Jesus in my life.' She had actually learned the secret of contentment. And it's not about stuff, like we're so used to in our materialistic Western world, or about how we feel. It's about actually knowing we have Jesus, and He has us, and allowing that simple joy to overflow."

"For me, it was the best ministry weekend in my entire ministry career," Watson says. "As a pastor, I felt like our hearts [expanded]. I think that's something every pastor wants. To help their church get closer to Jesus and have a heart that reflects his. Our partnership with Compassion really helped that happen."

If these pastors' experiences are any indication, people concerned that a guest speaker = commercial can rest easy. Buckingham, Penninga and Watson serve very different congregations across Canada, but they all agree: having a Compassion Artist come to their church was one of the best things they've done for their ministries. Not only did children around the world find sponsors to provide for their needs, but their congregations were refreshed by stories of God's work around the world and drawn closer to Jesus' heart. That sounds like a win-win experience, doesn't it? ✨

COMPASSION'S MINISTRY DOESN'T STOP IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD—WE WANT TO BLESS THE CHURCH IN CANADA, TOO.

That's why Compassion partners with a diverse group of musicians and speakers who use their time and talents to bless congregations across Canada in their worship gatherings. Using their gifts to connect the head and heart in praise to God, Compassion Artists will open the eyes of your congregation to the realities of poverty and invite them to take action by sponsoring with Compassion.

EXPERIENCE *worship* IN A NEW WAY AND SEE POVERTY IN A *new* LIGHT.

BRING A COMPASSION ARTIST TO YOUR CHURCH:

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"HAVING A COMPASSION ARTIST COME TO YOUR CHURCH IS PROBABLY THE BEST WAY FOR YOUR CONGREGATION TO UNDERSTAND THE MINISTRY OF COMPASSION."

— **DARCY KUHN** Pastor of Missions
at Northview Community Church
(Abbotsford, BC)

Dan Bremnes
Compassion Musician

FINDING TRUE LOVE IN A PLACE OF WAR

*Witnessing God's power to multiply gifts
and heal the broken in northern Uganda*

By Aveleen Schinkel

IT'S MY FIRST TIME ON AFRICAN SOIL, but I feel strangely at home.

Maybe it's because home is where the heart is, and part of my heart is etched here in pen and ink. I've been writing to my sponsored child in Uganda for the last five years, and I'm eager to experience a piece of her culture, to see what her life might be like.

It's also my first time visiting one of Compassion's child development centres. I want to see with my own eyes what I've read so much about.

Our driver weaves slowly to avoid gaping holes and fellow travellers. Motorcycles carry two or more at a time and bicyclists (some with goats or pigs trussed up on the back) rattle past those on foot. Long-horned cows are herded across the road by stick-

wielding children. Women tote babies on their backs and baskets of cassava atop their heads as they trek to market.

We trade rough city streets for even rougher country roads. Grass thatched huts are clustered in the long grass where women do laundry in plastic tubs. Others coax the patched farmland to yield maize, cassava and sweet potatoes.

I hang out the window as we drive, camera at the ready, and dust coats me like a second skin. That rusty clay is everywhere and judging by the towers of red bricks we pass, many have made it their means of income.

Tall stalks of grass glint like gold in the sun, and the clear sky seems even bluer against the deep greens and rich reds of the ground below. It's like a painting made with every colour on the



■ Left: True Love Child Development Centre in Northern Uganda. Top: Volunteers scooping food for the children. Bottom: Children sitting outside learning their lesson.

palette, and I'm overwhelmed trying to capture it all.

It's hard to fathom that such beauty and violence can live in the same place.

We're in the north of Uganda, and already I've heard of crippling fear and stagnant hope. For more than 20 years, the Lord's Resistance Army tore ragged holes in this country's soft tissue. Children stolen from parents were moulded into an army of murderers, often forced to maim and slaughter their own families or used as sex-slaves for rebel troops. Our host, Grace, answers my questions with stories, her soft voice a contrast to the terror her friends lived through.

Sofia* was just 12 years old when she went to the cassava fields and didn't come home. She was forced to carry equipment and care for the younger children in the soldiers' camp. She constantly faced starvation, but her greater fear was travelling—anyone too exhausted to keep up would be shot. After a month Sofia managed to escape, but it was seven more

months before she finally made it home.

Matthew* was eleven when he was kidnapped. He also carried heavy equipment in front of the army, acting as a buffer for the rebels if government forces attacked. It was two years before he managed to escape during a skirmish, fleeing for his life through the bush. Several

Centres, it reads in bold lettering. I smile at its certainty.

We step out of our vehicle and eyes peep out of classrooms, eagerly following us. A nervous excitement hangs in the air, and the children line up on the grass and welcome us in harmonized a cappella. We clap our encouragement and they break

HOW COULD I NOT UNDERSTAND “TRUE LOVE” WHEN A MEAGRE OFFERING IS TREATED WITH SUCH RESPECT?

weeks later he was reunited with his family who had long believed their son to be dead.

Grace's narration omits details that are better left in the dark, and I hear what she doesn't say—these stories are not unique. I'm certain the children and staff we're about to meet will have stories of their own.

We pull into a small town, a thin metal sign announcing that we've reached our destination. True Love Child Development

into a tribal dance, palms slapping the skin of a tall wooden drum. Their clear voices resonate against old stone walls.

After the performance, we share a meal of tea and toast and learn about the development centre. When we ask how True Love got its name, Pastor Alex smiles. He was hoping we'd ask.

“We used to be in a church that was divided, where people did not love one

another.” He pauses to find the right words. “When we started this church, we knew we could not share God's Word with others without showing His true love. So we called our church True Love, to remind us to love others the way God loves us.”

It isn't just printed on their sign. It's in everything they do.

Food is scooped into plastic dishes by volunteers who've spent hours in smoky cooking huts, making enough to feed every hungry belly. The work may be tedious, but they seize the opportunity to serve others, laughing and joking as they pass heaping plates of rice and greens to eager hands.

Children perch on plastic chairs beneath the heavy foliage of a tree, chalk letters on a dusty blackboard announcing the day's lesson. The teacher speaks from her heart, an open Bible in her palms. Her words are echoed in every classroom, no matter what the lesson—love God and love one another.

We befriend True Love's director, Donosio, a vibrant man who beams as he tells us he was once a sponsored child himself. After graduation he went on to university through the Leadership Development Program, and his life has never been the same. He laughs with excitement at how God works—and how he gets to give back what was given to him.

I join a group of youth on Sunday morning as the director teaches generosity.

“Maybe you have a million shillings,” he shouts, and his students giggle at the thought. “Maybe you have only one mango to give. But God can use whatever you give to bless others. He can turn your one mango into much, much more!” He gestures wildly and the children laugh along with him. I do, too—his joy is contagious. But how can I understand having so little that one mango is a hard-earned offering?

I can't—until we sit in church and a woman places a bag of beans in the offering plate.

A church member displays the beans like a trophy. “Who will buy these beans?” she shouts. “Who will honour our sister's gift?” It's a common occurrence in this impoverished community, and the response is immediate. The beans are quickly auctioned off and the purchase price is lovingly placed in the offering plate. It's like seeing the parable of the widow's coins play out in front of me. How could I not understand “true love” when a meagre offering is treated with such respect?

The Lord's Resistance Army's war is a thief, stealing children from parents and hope from a country. It has left wounds that run jagged and deep. But this church's persistent love is like salve over those scars—a healing only Jesus can bring. I want to take the beauty and the hardship home with me, to keep feeling that African dust on my skin, because Pastor Alex is right. There's only one thing that can soften hearts, heal souls or draw broken people through the church's open doors. “It's God's love,” said Pastor Alex. “And true love is what brought you here to us.” ✨

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



MEETING MY SPONSORED CHILD—A GIFT BEYOND WORDS

EIGHT DAYS. That was all we had in Uganda—and none near where my sponsored child, Barbra, lives. Our itinerary was packed, so I didn't even ask to meet her. I convinced myself that a gift would suffice.

When I asked our host, Grace, if she would deliver my gift, her double-take was near comedic. “You flew so far to get here,” she said slowly, “Why aren't you meeting her?” She was on her phone making arrangements before I could think up a feasible answer.

I found out Barbra was coming the day before we left. I toyed nervously with her gift as I waited, wondering what she'd be like in person. Her letters were always somewhat formal, and questions often went unanswered. What would we talk about?

And then she was there, and I didn't have to say anything. Soft-spoken to begin with, her loss of words mirrored my own—we were too overjoyed to do much more than laugh and hug. It was like being reunited with family. I loved her like a sister I'd never met.

We walked together and talked about everything that came to mind—families, music, the Bible, plans for the future. She shared her dream of becoming a lawyer, of doing something about the injustice she saw. I was so proud. Before we parted we prayed together, arms across shoulders and tears in our eyes.

I felt a little silly handing Barbra her gift when we'd just received one much bigger—but that's what happens when God steps in. And one thing's for certain, our letters will never be the same.

Photo: Aveleen and her sponsored child, Barbra, age 16.

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