



# The Gweimen Centre Newsletter

A Self-Sufficiency Center for Widows and Orphans of HIV/AIDS

Fall 2009

## **Women and Children of the Gweimen Centre**

by Mary Sytsma

*Editors Note: Mary Sytsma, a USA board member of the Gweimen Centre, traveled to Kwoj, Nigeria, where she volunteered in this outreach to widows and orphans of HIV/AIDS. In the following vignette, Mary introduces us to some of the women and children she met. This article also appeared in the April 2009, edition of Wheaton Cross Connections, the newsletter of the Wheaton Christian Reformed Church where Mary is an active member.*

### **Vincent and Precious**

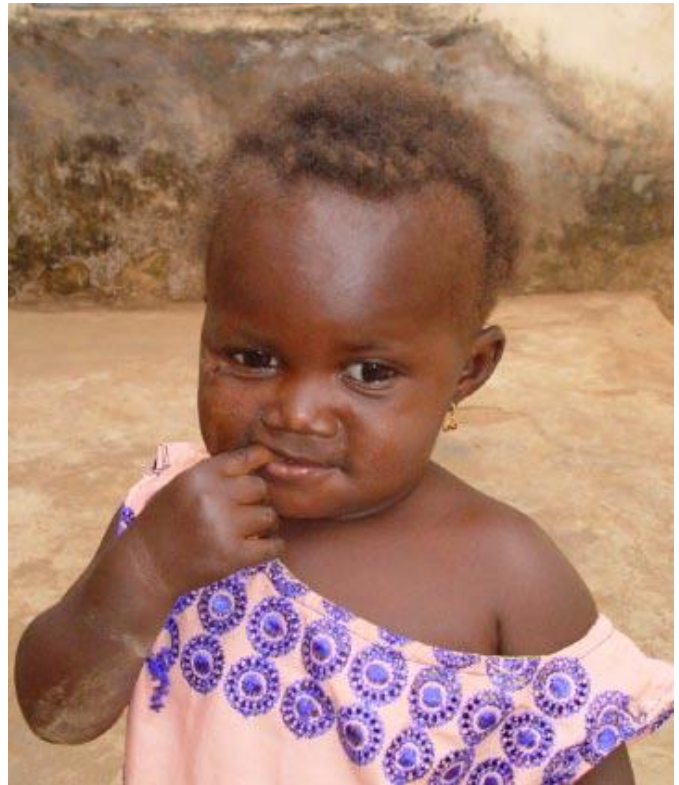
We hear a lot of talk about financial troubles in this country, and we worry about the economic downturn and what it means for our personal situations. For Dan and me, it is concern for the costs of Jonathan's college education on top of our other responsibilities. But for some people in the world poverty is a crushing reality. It affects every aspect of their lives.

It wasn't until I went to Nigeria that I saw poverty that kills. Poverty there is not a result of losses from their investments. It is a way of life. It is no more or less devastating to be poor there than in the US, but there is less hope. I think, for me, that is the difference. I have seen what happens to folks who live without hope. I have also seen what happens when you offer hope, such an intangible thing, to people who do not expect anyone to care.

In January I asked the congregation to pray for little Vincent. He is 4 years old, and while I was in Nigeria, he had malaria, typhoid and worms, all at the same time. His stomach was distended and very hard to the touch. He was passing blood. He was listless and wouldn't eat. His father is dead, and his mother is HIV positive. For the past year, we thought Vincent was also HIV positive. However, in September, Abigail, the director of the center, had him retested. The test results showed him to be HIV negative, so he won't have to take the medicine that is so hard on such fragile bodies.

Praise God. But what if . . . ? The test was wrong before. I worry, while the women who work at the center rejoice over God's miracle. Keep praying for him.

Vincent's mother works at the Gweimen Centre as a cook. He has a little sister who is growing up loved and nourished because she came to the Gweimen Centre as an infant. Vincent and his sister don't have the same father. Mama Vincent married her husband's brother after Vincent's father died. He wanted a baby and didn't care that she was HIV positive, so she got pregnant.



When it came time for Mama Vincent to deliver the baby, they were unable to afford the hospital or a doctor. Abigail went to the house to help. Abigail arrived just as the baby was ready to be born. She caught the little girl in her arms as she came into the world, and then she rushed her to the hospital to find out what to do. The name of that baby: Precious – a precious little life. That is a common name for a child in our center – Precious, as if we needed a reminder of the words of that children's song – "they are precious in his sight." They are. I remind myself that each one is just as precious to Jesus as my own son.

Abigail treats every child in the center as if that little one were her own. She comforts their hurts. She scolds them when they need it. She smiles at their stories. She is proud of their accomplishments. She worries about them. She sacrifices to give them what they need. She treats them as if they are precious. She loves them.

But sometimes the stories of their lives seem so sad and hard. The reality of their lives can break my heart. And then I am reminded of a quote from the founder of World Vision: "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." If our hearts are not broken by these things, then something is wrong.

Where is the hope in all of this? Vincent and Precious will get the care and nourishment they need because of the Gweimen Centre. They will be able to go to school. They will be able to dream about what they want to grow up to be. They already know what it means to be loved. They already know the words to one of the children's favorite songs: "Joy, joy, joy. Jesus keeps me singing. See what the Lord has done for me – died just to set me free. In my heart a melody - joy, joy, joy."



## Those "Left Behind"

Little Vincent is 4 years old. While I was in Nigeria, he had malaria, typhoid and worms, all at the same time. His stomach was distended and very hard to the touch. He was passing blood. He was listless and wouldn't eat. His father is dead, and his mother, who is HIV positive, works at the Gweimen Centre as a cook.

So writes Mary Sytsma, one of our Board members, after her visit to the Gweimen Centre in Kwoi, Nigeria.

Vincent is like others who find refuge at the Gweimen Centre. His father is dead and he is left behind: he is an "orphan." The word itself speaks of the tragedy of vulnerability, of a child helpless and at risk of starvation, abuse, and exploitation. Orphans are often forced into slavery or drawn into prostitution. In recent decades they have also been conscripted into child armies by warlords.

"And his mother is HIV positive." When Vincent's father died she became a widow, one of the women who are especially vulnerable and exposed in many cultures. An orphan, a widow, and HIV infection. This is what the heart of Gweimen Centre is all about. "A Self-Sufficiency Center for Widows and Orphans of HIV/AIDS" – that's our mission. To care for those "left behind."

This kind of care is especially close to God's heart. God is even glad to be called "a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows." And we are called to share God's concern: "Defend the cause of the orphan and plead the case of the widow," thunders the prophet. No wonder a younger brother of Jesus once even defined true religion in this way: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress..."

The Gweimen Centre is a compassionate community created to answer this call of God to care for "widows and orphans of HIV/AIDS." Perhaps you are also hearing God's call. You are warmly welcome to join us in our efforts to answer to the call.

*Vern Geurkink, Gweimen, U.S.A*

## "Little Africa"

Did you know that there are two Africas? The "Big Africa" is the one we hear about in the news when we read about leaders and elections and gold and diamonds and international aid. There is also a "Little Africa" that is very much alive in the countryside and small urban neighborhoods. It remains a solid society that continues to

function... the extended family and the clan assume the responsibility for all services for their members, whether social or economic. People live in closely organized groups and willingly accept communal obligations for mutual support. The sick, the aged and children are all cared for by the extended family. (John Iliffe, as reported in Susan Hunter, *Black Death*, pp. 73-74)

Someone might wonder why "Little Africa" can't take in these orphans and widows and care for them in that wonderful tradition of the extended family. Actually, in many communities it still does.

But even this caring system is being overwhelmed by the catastrophe that is HIV/AIDS. In some places the death rate is so high that there is no longer wood enough for making coffins, or communities are running out of room for burying their loved ones.

There are stories of older mothers who, having lost 5 or 6 of their adult children, end up being responsible for the care of 10 or 15 orphaned grandchildren. Undermined by such devastation the caring system will collapse without outside help.

Many of these traditional impulses of "Little Africa" come to special expression in the Gweimen Centre. In the withering storm of the AIDS onslaught, it continues to embody the concern and compassion rooted in centuries of communal commitment.

North Americans whose hearts beat with compassion are invited to reach beyond their own communities to offer "Little Africa" a helping hand to carry on its ancient, sacred tradition of communal care through the Gweimen Centre.

*Vern Geurkink, Gweimen, U.S.A*

## Encouraging Words

An ancient poet once sang: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.... The Hebrew Bible, Psalm 68:5f, Today's New International Version.

A weekly news magazine recently reported that people in Nigeria, including many who live on less than \$2.00 per day, tend to have far lower rates of depression than Americans who enjoy a far higher standard of living. This is reflected in comments made by American travelers who return from Nigeria marveling at the joy expressed in the laughter and singing they witnessed in and around the Gweimen Centre!

## Gweimen Centre

Our readers may notice that the spelling of the name of our organization looks different throughout this issue of the Newsletter. This new spelling is a small correction to represent more accurately in English the name as given in Nigeria. "Gweimen" is a word in the Hausa language that describes a condition of peace and tranquility. It is our prayer that the women and children of our community experience all that our name so beautifully portrays.

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