

## Special Feature: Youth in Mission in Kenya

### Emily Wright

Why do we go on missions? Why do we leave the comfort of our home, friends, and family to go somewhere we have never been before to take care of people we have never met before? For me, it was a feeling. An indescribable feeling I had in my heart. I simply knew that I had to go. It reminds me of the verse 1 John 3:17: “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

This past summer I traveled to Kenya with the Amani scholars program to learn about the AIDS orphan crisis and see the truly remarkable and heroic work being done with it. I went to make a connection, to find something there that united me, personally, to this great struggle. I definitely found this connection, and in only my second day there.

This connection is named Sharon. She was less than a year old when I met her. She was one of the first babies at New Life Homes Orphanage in Nakuru, Kenya, one of the first and few orphanages in Kenya to except HIV-positive babies. Although she was crying and had food all over her face the first time I met her, she was the most beautiful baby I had ever seen. I played with her, held her, fed her, took pictures with her (a lot of pictures), let her fall asleep in my arms,

and made her laugh. Sharon truly touched my heart. Even though I am home now, a piece of my heart is in Kenya.

My work for Amani is very meaningful to me not just because of my connection to Sharon, but because of what she taught me. There are 14 million-plus AIDS orphans on this planet right now, a huge number that didn’t really gain true meaning until I held one of those victims in my arms. Holding Sharon in my arms and seeing her healthy, bright eyes look back at me taught me just how important love is.

I John 4:7-15 describes this: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

One of my fellow Amani scholars once said, “the world is one big community, and we must be sure that we take care of our neighbors.” This connects directly to one of the main tenets of

both the Jewish and our Christian faith that is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

There is a Maya Angelou quote I would like to share that says a lot about what I’ve learned. It tells us, “If you find it in your heart to care for somebody else, you will have succeeded.”

*Emily Wright is a member of Home Moravian Church and will be attending Wake Forest University in the fall.*

## **Jon Barnes**

I am going to share some stories from my journal during the third week of my trip in the lakeside city of Kisumu, Kenya. The New Life Home here is beautiful, and the directors, John and Prisca Ondече are nothing short of wonderful caretakers. There are 39 babies here in Kisumu, and this region around Lake Victoria has the highest incidence of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. John Ondече explained to us that at one of the primary schools in the area, there are around 700 students in attendance, 400 of them are orphans. Meaning that more than 50% of them have no living parents; unfortunately this is not an uncommon story here.

A group of us went to visit one of the elementary schools in Kisumu. As we approached the gate, what seemed like a torrent of green uniform-clad children came running by us. The school’s principle later explained that it was lunch-time and that most of the kids were headed back home for lunch. While talking with

the principle in his office, we noticed through his window that many of the children had not left the school with the others, but were sitting in the grass some of them eating the traditional meal of beans and ugali, but most of them without any food at all. The principle explained that the most of the children who stayed at the school during lunch were the ones who had no parents and no relatives to provide for them, they had no one to go home to.

The following Sunday we attended John and Prisca’s church, Christ Church of Kisumu, and were warmly greeted by the congregation. The charisma of worship was really invigorating. The praise and worship team lead the congregation for about 45 minutes in song and dance. We sang both in English and Kiswahili, and I was caught by surprise when one of the songs that popped up on the projector was one that I had learned at Laurel Ridge “Open the Eyes of My Heart.” I am reminded of how small the world really is, and how our experiences can be so different, yet much the same.

The text for the message was Matthew 28:19, which urges us to go and be disciples, to make disciples of all nations. Pondering the text began a line of questions and thoughts: What does it mean to be a disciple? Certainly, to be a disciple of Christ is to believe in the Gospel, and to help others to know Christ.

How do we know Christ? Does knowing Christ mean to believe that he is the Son of God, our Lord and Savior? Or is knowing Christ, to follow in his example — by practicing his discipline? Having compassion, knowing true poverty, sickness, and above all, loving others?

If the discipline of Christ is exemplified through his life's work, then it seems to me that, in order to be a disciple, we must be concerned with the needs and the welfare of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. As human beings, is it our compassionate works and loving actions that make us Christian, or is it our belief in Christ as the son of God?

I struggled with these questions as I encountered others whose mission in Kenya was not to help those in need with their earthly predicament, but solely to "save men's souls" for heaven.

To put the HIV/AIDS crisis into perspective, we can consider the devastation caused by the tsunami of 2003. This natural disaster took the lives of over 200 thousand people, and the world community responded to its victims with great compassion. In 2006, HIV/AIDS is estimated to have taken the lives of 2.1 million men, women and children — what would be the equivalent of 10 tsunamis ravaging a single continent in only a year.

What's worse is that in Sub-Saharan Africa last year 2.8 million people were infected with HIV/AIDS. The disease is wiping out an entire generation, leaving children without the primary economic providers. Famine is widespread not only because of severe drought from human-induced climate change, but also because there is no one to tend to the fields. In countries where your children are your economic security during retirement age, grandmothers are being left to care for their grandchildren. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is certainly the most pressing humanitarian crisis of our time.

I would argue that as Christians we cannot turn away from the more than 12 million orphans in Africa who have been robbed by a virus, robbed of their childhood innocence by the death of their mother and father. In the face of this adversity, somehow Kenyans seem to stay hopeful. This hope can be seen in the eyes of orphans like David who was given a second chance at life because of the contributions of people here in North Carolina. Although most of us may never step foot on the continent we can no-less have a tremendous live-giving impact on the fate of these children.

Since last August when I spoke with you, the Amani Children's Foundation has officially pledged to care for all 39 of the babies in the Kisumu home, but this can only be done with your continued support. If every member of our congregation gave just a dollar and some change, we could provide a year's worth of food, medicine and care for two infants at New Life Homes.

I encourage you all to think of ways that you might like to contribute to the work of the Amani Foundation, whether by sponsoring a child or creating your own fundraising event.

*Jon Barnes is a member of Home Moravian Church and is attending UNC-Asheville.*