

## The Need



When Britain colonized the East African region of Uganda in the late 1800s, the boundaries defining this colony grouped together several ethnic kingdoms – each with its own political system and culture. When Uganda gained independence in 1962, these differences confounded efforts to establish a working political community. Instead, Uganda endured over twenty years of guerrilla war, totalitarian rule and human rights abuses that claimed some 400,000 lives. Since the mid-1980s, new leadership has brought relative political stability and economic growth to Uganda. However, more than 7 million people continue to live in chronic poverty. Armed fighting among hostile ethnic groups has placed additional stress on families, as tens of thousands of civilians have been killed or kidnapped and over 1 million people displaced from their homes.

Although Uganda has the second highest birth rate in the world, many children born in this troubled nation either die young or lose their parents early. As of 2007, Uganda had an estimated 2.5 million orphans under 17 years old. Of that number, about half were orphaned by AIDs. The burden of care for these children often falls on grandparents. Other children live in makeshift shelters, with an older child acting as head of household. Increasingly, dying parents or relatives unable to provide care are relinquishing infants to Uganda's orphanages.

## Holt's History in Uganda

In 2001, Holt began working with indigenous NGO Action for Children (AFC) to help serve vulnerable families and children in Uganda, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDs. The partnership immediately expanded AFC's ability to reach, counsel and assist children. With the primary goal to keep children within their extended family – and off the streets or out of institutions – Holt and AFC began developing services that enabled heads of household to support their children.

To help families achieve stability, Holt and AFC provided counseling and income-generating activities for parents, and an educational program – the Children's Brigades – for children. AFC pioneered these Brigades to advance vocational training services and promote the goal of universal primary education. The Brigades offer local youth opportunities ranging from life skills development to cultural and community improvement to music, dance and drama.

While developing family preservation services, Holt also began to explore the possibility of establishing an adoption program in Uganda. Initial efforts included helping the Government of Uganda develop guidelines and practices consistent with the Hague Convention – the international treaty that sets the standards for ethical practice in ICA. Holt also allied with local partners to cultivate interest in and awareness of adoption among child welfare groups, babies' homes, churches, community groups and prospective adoptive parents in Uganda. The efforts of one Ugandan advocacy group – Families for Children – resulted in several domestic adoptions.

After much planning and discussions, in 2008, Holt implemented the Moses Project – a pilot child care and international adoption (ICA) program. In 2009, six Ugandan children were formally assigned to Holt families. The first two joined their families in the U.S. at the end of 2009.

## Current Projects

In 2010, after some misunderstanding between the U.S. Consular and the Uganda Government regarding language used in court documents, the adoption process slowly began to solidify into a working system. Another two Holt families traveled to Uganda to receive their children at the end of the year.

While developing an ICA program, Holt has also continued to advocate for domestic adoption – an option considered preferable to ICA because it enables children to remain within their birth culture. Frequently, Ugandan families will simply assume the responsibility of raising the children of relatives affected by HIV/AIDs. Families rarely go through the process to officially adopt children. Through local advocacy, domestic adoption has, however, shown some recent growth.

While seeking permanent homes for children through adoption, Holt also strives to prevent child abandonment and resultant homelessness. Family preservation continues to be the focus of AFC. Together, Holt, AFC and other donors have developed services that bring real stability into children's lives. AFC regularly conducts home visits to check for adequate housing, health, food stocks and other significant indicators of a family's wellbeing as they progress toward "atenge" – to stand on one's own feet. Once they reach atenge, a family graduates from the family preservation program and becomes a model for remaining families. To ensure ongoing stability, AFC follows up with and continues to consult graduated families. In 2009, 112 children and their families reached atenge.

For children whose families are unable to support them, the Queen Esther Palace near Kampala provides a temporary care solution. Often, malnourished children admitted in order to regain health will later reunite with their parents, once AFC has helped the family achieve stability. Others join families through adoption. Holt has also supported the opening of the AFC transit center in the region of Masulita, which began providing care for neglected, abandoned and malnourished children at the end of 2009.

Through school-based outreach campaigns, AFC educates children of their rights in regards to child abuse and other threats. Children in crisis learn about the resources available through AFC's free telephone helpline, including immediate and follow-up counseling, legal aid and referrals to shelters and medical care. With Holt support, AFC promotes basic education as well – maintaining 34 early childhood development centers for over one thousand 3 to 5-year-olds as well as providing fees and scholastic materials for hundreds more school-age children.

AFC continues to support both group-based and individual family projects, including the Children's Brigades and income-generating activities that help families become self-reliant. Five AFC community clinics provide medical care in four districts, and in 2009, AFC began a foster care program, placing the first

three children in this family-like alternative to institutional care. The same year, Holt initiated a sponsorship program, providing essential funding for basic nutrition, medical care and shelter for children in Uganda.

## Strategic Directions



Through partnership with Action for Children, Holt helps support thousands of children and has intensified family preservation services for over 400 families in Uganda. In the coming years, Holt will continue to steadily grow the total children we serve here while also working toward a smoother adoption process.

In the two years since the Moses Project began, Holt staff has developed positive relationships with adoption officials in Uganda. In 2008, Holt invited key officials to Holt offices in Eugene for an orientation on our goals and needs for ICA in Uganda. Based on positive feedback from these and other stakeholders in the region, we feel confident that a new phase of cooperation and understanding in adoption processing has begun.

AFC has a dedicated and energetic staff and has shown great success accessing grant funds over the years. One recently obtained grant will enable AFC to develop services for children affected by HIV. In the past two years, Holt staff has also observed AFC's creative and effective response to the frequently unexpected demands of the process. AFC's ability to nimbly address and adapt to these demands reinforces our confidence in both our partnership with AFC and the developing adoption program in Uganda.

While working to refine the process of ICA in Uganda, Holt will continue serving children and families through family preservation and reunification; support for child care centers and other community programs; and by enrolling significantly more children into our sponsorship program – at a rate of 100 per year to reach 500 children in 2013.