

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 one 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. In 2009, UNICEF estimated that Uganda has about 2.7 million orphans – having lost one or both parents – from all causes. 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. More and more, infants are brought into care by dying parents or relatives who are unable to provide for them.

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 equipped families with the tools and resources needed 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. Holt has through the years helped AFC to maintain over 30 early childhood development centers for over one thousand 3 to 5-year-olds as well as provide fees and scholastic materials for hundreds more school-age children.

While children attended school, their families worked toward the goal of "atenge" – a Ugandan term for "standing on one's own feet." As families progressed through the program, AFC regularly visited their homes – checking for adequate housing, health, food stocks and other significant indicators of a family's wellbeing. Once they reached atenge, a family would graduate from the family preservation program and become a model for remaining families.

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.

Also in 2009, Holt initiated a sponsorship program, in which child sponsors in the U.S. help provide essential funding for basic nutrition, medical care and shelter for children in Uganda. To give children a more nurturing environment while awaiting permanent placement, AFC also began a pilot foster care program, placing the first three children in foster families in 2009.

For many more children waiting to join permanent families, the Queen Esther Palace near Kampala provides a temporary care solution. Holt supported the opening of this transit center at the end of 2009.

Current Projects

After some misunderstanding between the U.S. Consular and the Ugandan government regarding language used in court documents, the adoption process slowly began to solidify into a working system.

While developing an ICA program, Holt has also continued to advocate for domestic adoption – an option Holt always strives to pursue before ICA as it allows children to remain within their birth culture. Frequently, Ugandan families will simply assume the responsibility of raising children of relatives who've passed – a growing reality in Uganda as so many children have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Families rarely go through the process to officially adopt children. Through local advocacy, domestic adoption has, however, shown some recent growth.

Strategic Directions

In the four 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. In the years since this successful gathering, we have placed a total of 9 children in loving homes. As of Spring 2012, ten more children are matched and are waiting to join their families.

Holt continues to support foster care as an alternative to institutional care for children waiting for permanent families in Uganda, and hopes to expand the number of children living in foster families in the coming years.



Holt also continues to support family preservation work with Action for Children. We feel a strong sense of accomplishment, as our work has had a lasting impact on the children and families we have served together in Uganda. During our 11-year relationship with AFC, hundreds of families have successfully graduated from the program, ensuring safe, stable homes for nearly 3,000 children.

To build on our success with AFC, we are now exploring new ways to serve families and children in Uganda and pursuing opportunities to bring in additional partners that will help us extend our reach in 2013.