

## Case study: ZOE (Zimbabwe Orphans through Extended hands)



Due to HIV and AIDS, the number of orphans in Zimbabwe is growing rapidly. There is increasing recognition that traditional orphanages are inadequate, and that the church needs to respond more effectively. ZOE was set up to encourage local churches to care for orphans and to support them in doing this.

### Aims

- To raise awareness among local churches of the importance of ministering to orphans holistically, and to provide training in how to do this effectively.
- To strengthen the work of churches already involved in caring for orphans through training and support.

### Steps in the process

1. Envisioning workshop, offered to all local church leaders after an initial request from a few. The workshop:
  - uses Bible studies and participatory training approaches to look at the role and responsibility of the church and the needs of local orphans.
  - communicates the message that the first need of orphans is not physical resources such as food or housing, but rather love, care, support and nurture. These needs can be met only by local, loving people.
2. Pastors share the vision with their congregations and draw up a list of volunteers and a list of orphans in the local area.
3. Volunteer workshop, facilitated by ZOE staff or a volunteer area co-ordinator, with the venue and logistics organised by the local church. Issues covered include finding orphans, making visits, keeping records, identifying needs and involving existing community structures.
4. Visit programmes implemented by volunteers.
5. Monthly meeting of local church leaders and volunteers to share experiences, learning and problems.

Additional activities facilitated by ZOE include:

- Specialist training to enable local churches to provide greater assistance, such as setting up an income generation initiative, recognising child abuse or providing psychosocial support.
- 'Training of trainers' workshops for volunteer area coordinators, who go on to facilitate envisioning workshops.
- Exchange visits to enable volunteers to learn from each other. ZOE provides some funds for this.

### ZOE's work

ZOE is an organisation with a minimal structure. For the first nine years of its work there were no employed staff and even now there are only eight. This was intentional. The founder did not want ZOE to become an organisation that implemented projects, but instead to be an agency that envisions and facilitates the local churches to act.

ZOE responds to requests from local church leaders for help in addressing the needs in their community. ZOE gathers together all the church leaders in the local area for a day in order to envision them. Bible studies play an important role in this because they help the leaders to understand the responsibility of the local church. Once the pastors have returned to their congregations to share the vision, many people usually come forward to become volunteers who care for orphans in the community on behalf of the local churches.

Each volunteer cares for no more than five families. The volunteers aim to visit each family at least once a month. The fact that the volunteers come back regularly has a positive impact on the families, especially if the household has been abandoned by the extended family. When they visit, the volunteers seek to identify the needs, look for signs of abuse, listen, help practically, share resources, share something from the Bible and pray with them. Common activities carried out by volunteers include providing feeding advice and advice on seeking medical help. The volunteers keep records of their visits and report on them at a monthly meeting of volunteers and local church leaders. This helps to ensure local church ownership of the work with orphans. It also ensures that the volunteers are supported in their work.

From the beginning of the process, ZOE makes it clear that it will not provide resources other than training, since the work is a church activity and responsibility. The local churches therefore take responsibility for the volunteers and help them to support families by providing regular offerings or practical help. For example, a volunteer might call on other church members to help to repair a roof or to prepare land for a family in their care.

## Impact

The impact of ZOE's work is extraordinary. Seven years after it started, the programme had led to local churches caring for 15,000 orphans. Then there was sudden growth. In the following year the number of orphans cared for grew to over 40,000. This was partly due to an increase in the number of needy households because of drought and unemployment, but it was also because the number of churches joining the programme increased. The number of volunteers grew from 550 to 1,013 and the number of participating churches increased from 121 to 191 in the same year. Three years later, there were 600 churches involved in the programme and 2,000 volunteers supporting nearly 100,000 children.

Most areas that have started orphan care programmes have seen an increase in church attendance. As the programme shows the local church to be a caring community, it has gained respect.

## Lessons learned

**ZOE's focus on training means that to expand its work, more trainers are needed.** The work has been so successful that there is high demand from other local church leaders for training. Some volunteers were therefore selected to become 'volunteer area co-ordinators', who could help to facilitate some of ZOE's workshops. This approach was seen as more empowering and sustainable than taking on new staff.

**Some external resources may be needed.** The level of need and the number of orphans is so overwhelming that local churches often struggle to offer the most basic care. There is a need for external resources to supplement the resources that churches and volunteers are already contributing. However, this needs to be managed in a way that will not disempower local initiative and cause dependency. The focus needs to be on increasing self-reliance, such as through income-generation initiatives.

**As the process is simple, it is easy to replicate elsewhere.** It can take as little as 3–6 months from the pastor's initial request for help, to volunteers visiting orphans.

[Click here](#) for a more detailed version of this case study in English and French.

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, pages 28-30