

CARING FOR ORPHANS... I'M AFRAID WE'RE DOING IT ALL WRONG

by Lori Resmer

Over the past years, I have had the privilege of leading multiple teams overseas through World Orphans Journey trips. As a previous director of the ministry, I have observed several other teams that have traveled overseas under the leadership of other outstanding team leaders. Part of my job that I love is the discipleship process that allows me to educate and teach team members about what God's Word says about orphan care, about our role and responsibility in tackling orphan-causing issues, and about the various models of orphan care that other organizations employ. I have noticed in the past decade or so that God is doing an amazing work in the hearts of His people in regards to orphan care. The Church is finally starting to rise up and carry out the mandate in Scripture to rescue and care for the fatherless, widow and the poor around the world. Social media, the internet, photography and video, and the ease of travel in this day and age has only increased our awareness of the orphan crisis and extreme levels of poverty in the majority world. I am excited that we are finally starting to respond; however, I feel a huge burden to speak into a particular issue today that I have come across time and again while working with individuals along the way.

I won't beat around the bush: I fear that we're doing it all wrong. My concern is that our hearts are leading the way and we are not doing what is in the best interest of the children that we are trying to help. Let me explain....

I just had a phone conversation with a lovely young lady this past week who recently served with World Orphans on a one-week Journey trip to Haiti. She is passionate, educated, well-traveled and absolutely loves the Lord. She has a huge desire to take care of orphans around the world and is actually starting a non-profit ministry to allow her the platform to do so. I was ecstatic for her and proud of her willingness to make a difference! That is the goal and heartbeat of Journey Trips – to empower people to take action as an orphan advocate. However, I saw something on Facebook one day that made my heart sink. One of her ministry goals was to start an orphanage in the following year. I screamed at my computer, as if me voicing my concerns would make a difference, "NO! Please don't do that!!" I felt such an incredible burden after reviewing her website and reading through their goals and plans. I had to do something. So I picked up the phone.

We had a great conversation and she took everything I had to say with such grace. I feel as though my relationship with her allowed me the opportunity to speak into this and hopefully shed light on why I am so adamant about NOT starting/funding/partnering with orphanages.

Below is a conclusion of my conversation with her, with various bullet points summarizing what I communicated that day:

First off, God did not intend for ANY person to be institutionalized. He created us to be in families. If that is the case, then why are we so passionate about orphanages? Why do we glamorize "orphanages" and "orphan homes" and applaud those who go over to invest and work in them? Yes, it's great that people have a heart for the orphan....but again, my fear is that



we're doing it all wrong. There HAS to be a better way to care for orphans than by putting them in an institution. "God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing..." Psalm 68:6.

If we build an orphanage, it WILL be filled with children...but that's not necessarily a good thing. In the movie *Field of Dreams*, there's a voice that says, "If you build it, they will come." That rings so true with orphanages, as well. You see, what many of us don't realize is that many of children who are living in orphanages aren't even orphans! I was astonished to see the statistics on this. In Liberia, for example, 98% of the children living in orphanages in that country have one surviving parent. In Sri Lanka that number is 92%, and in Zimbabwe 40%. I saw this first-hand when I was serving in Haiti. We were working one day at a small orphanage and there was a knock at the front gate. One of the workers answered the door and found a mother with her two children. The mother pleaded with the orphanage for them to take her children because she didn't have the means to care for them anymore. What we discovered is that this is a COMMON thing that orphanage directors face around the globe. Orphan Care Network says it like this: "These statistics reflect a very common dynamic: In communities under severe economic stress, increasing the number of places in residential care results in children being pushed out of poor households to fill those places." It's a sad reality, but we have to put ourselves in the shoes of parents living in poverty or who are faced with other dire circumstances. Think about it, if you had children and had no way of providing adequate food, medicine, or education for them, would you not consider taking them to a nearby orphanage to see if they could take them in so that you're children wouldn't starve? I know I would. Those parents aren't bad parents – they are just hopeless and in survival mode. So we have to ask ourselves the question: if most of the children that are institutionalized actually have family but have been brought to that facility because their parents or other family members didn't have the adequate means to care for them in the first place, wouldn't it make more sense for us to assist those FAMILIES so that they can stay together? That, to me, seems to be the best solution and one worth figuring out.

Growing up in an orphanage has an adverse effect on personality, emotional and social development. Several studies have shown that EVERY child that spends significant time in an orphanage displays "symptoms of inadequate personality development such as aggression, attention-demanding behavior, sleep disturbance, over-affection and repelling affection" (*The Urban Halo*, Craig Greenfield). I've seen this first-hand in orphanages during my travels as well. Individuals on short-term mission teams tend to think they must be something special when a child at an orphanage is overly affectionate with them during a visit. We think, "Oh, look how sweet he is! He has been holding onto me all day and won't let go of my hand." (I've mistakenly assumed this as well prior to my study on this particular topic.) What we don't understand, though, is that that very child is that way with every single visitor that comes to the orphanage because "over-affection" is actually a psychosocial issue. This is a phenomena that results from children not have available, appropriate, nurturing and stable mother-figures in their life. These children have failed to have the opportunity to attach to a caretaker and are deprived of this deep emotional need being met; therefore, they are overly affectionate with anyone that will give them the time of day. Other studies show that IQ is severely affected, especially when children are institutionalized at a young age.

Also, researchers have found that even when high quality orphanages are adequately staffed and children are receiving attention and love, there was still a statistically significant difference in emotional stability between those children and similar children in foster care. Also, the ones living in orphanages had a greater tendency to depression. This point is one of my biggest

concerns! I feel as though many well-intended individuals around the world think that if they construct an orphanage that has brightly-colored walls, adequate staff to provide love and attention to the children, funding to provide 2-3 meals a day, and an educational program to keep the children in school, then they are doing a great thing and are taking excellent care of those children. Not to be judgmental or critical, but is that really a great thing in light of all the research and studies that have been done? Is that really a great thing considering the fact that those children WILL struggle and face major developmental delays given their institutionalization? I believe that the hearts of people who are starting orphanages are BEAUTIFUL, please don't get me wrong. I just believe those hearts are misguided. That passion and love for the fatherless just needs to be redirected so that the best interests of the children are considered first and foremost.

Finally, orphanages are expensive and lack sustainability when compared to community-based orphan care models. On average it costs about \$2,000/year per child in an orphanage setting whereas a child that is supported in a home in a community can be adequately supported for about \$30/month (about \$360/year). Again, if we look at the fact that most orphans are "economic orphans," meaning they are only residing in the orphanage because of economic stressors, then it makes total sense for a ministry/organization to keep the child in a family and in a community and help support that family to care for the child. By keeping children in the community and empowering families to care for their own children or extended family members, a nation is strengthened and economic growth and development can begin to occur. Microfinance is a huge need that would allow us to see HUGE change in communities if organizations and ministries would focus their attention on empowering and training families to be self-sustainable instead of building orphanages. Many families have the skills but just don't have the resources and/or the initial capital to get a small business off the ground. If we could empower and equip families to do that, then they would be able to sustain their families and wouldn't be knocking down the doors of orphanages looking for ways to provide a meal to their starving children.

My conversation ended with this particular young lady by reinforcing the fact that orphanages are not BAD...and I want to reiterate that again for you as a reader. Many of you, I'm sure, have some sort of connection with an orphanage in some part of the world and perhaps even know and love children or the staff that work there. I do, as well, and will continue to support them as best as I can given the resources and knowledge that I have. I have no intention of abandoning those places! However, if I were to ever be asked by that orphanage director what my opinion was on the best care for those children that are currently in his/her orphanage, I would tell them that it's essential that they not be ignored or forgotten. The solution isn't to turn our backs on existing orphanages or orphan homes. But a radical shift in our thinking and how to operate those facilities would be the first step. How can we perhaps "de-institutionalize" those children and help to reintegrate them into society? Can we trace each child's family and possibly reunify those children with family members and redirect the funds that we were using at the orphanage to help train and equip the family to care for that child in their home? If families are legitimately nowhere to be found OR the family members that are discovered are not capable of properly caring for those children (i.e. abuse is suspected or the parent has a physical/mental disability that disallows them to properly care for themselves, much less a child), then at that point can we equip and train families within a local church to be foster parents. I mean, God has provided the mandate for the Church to care for orphans, right? So why not start with the local church right there in the community where that child was born? Why not re-train the orphanage workers to be social workers to visit the children in their new homes and ensure that proper care is being provided? God created families and he intends for us to be in them. So let's invest in solutions

that allow orphans to be in loving HOMES. That is the only way to tackle the worldwide orphan crisis.

My appeal to passionate, well-intending individuals out there, Christian or not, is to let your head guide your heart. As I mentioned, I love the hearts of those people who are giving, sacrificing, and serving all because they want to make a difference in the life of a child. Praise God for you if you are one of those individuals! But my prayer is that you seek wisdom, study the topic thoroughly, network with as many individuals as you can, and make sure that in the end, you are pursuing a solution that is MOST beneficial to the child. May we all be challenged to not do things that seemingly appear to be good for orphans. And heaven forbid may we be challenged to not just do things because they make us feel good about ourselves at the end of the day. Let's put the orphan above ourselves and ask the question: If this were my kid, what type of environment would I want them in? I doubt any of us would resort to placing them in institutions or "children's homes" knowing the likely outcome of their emotional, social, physical and mental state.

May we all "learn to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, defend the cause of orphans, and fight for the rights of widows" **with wisdom and discernment** (Isaiah 1:17).