The plight of children at risk [orphaned and vulnerable children] essay

Introduction One notable trend affecting the world wide church is the plight of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children, populating much of the developing world, with large concentrations on the Asian and African continents.

This research paper attempts to provide some detail regarding how vast this problem is and what some experts in the field have to say concerning this issue, and finally taking a look at one secular organization's model which offers and excellent pattern for addressing this issue. Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC), deserve the attention, love and support of the worldwide church, and their plight offers a strategic means by which the church can carry out its mandate to make disciples. The state of today's children In a 2006 radio broadcast on " Family Life Today," the speaker estimated that nearly 143 million children across the globe are orphaned. " The speaker went on to say that " these aren't just faceless numbers, these are children in need, children who long to be held…loved…and desperately want a place to call home. Additionally, many children who are not orphaned are subject to life altering risk and dangers; in a presentation by Anne Kielland of the world bank; she estimates that nearly 60 million children are subjected to one or more of the below listed categories: -Being affected by HIV/AIDS; -Living in and of the street -Affected by armed conflict -Living with disabilities or chronic illnesses -Exposed to a hazardous form of child laborSeveral Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) have been researching the crisis surrounding HIV/AIDS for some time now, their findings associated with the children left in the aftermath of this horrendous disease is staggering.

According to a UNICEF report, " The HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa has already orphaned a generation of children—and now seems set to orphan generations more. Today, over 11 million children under the age of 15 living in sub-Saharan Africa have been robbed of one or the both parents by HIV/AIDS. Seven years from now, the number is expected to have grown to 20 million. At that point, anywhere from 15 to over 25 per cent of the children in a dozen sub-Saharan African countries will be orphans—the vast majority of them will have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. " In the mist of this research, one startling discovery concerning the well being of children regardless of race or culture is beginning to surface; the importance and a healthy, loving and responsible family unit.

According to researchers with UNICEF, " orphaned adolescents often lose one of the key protective factors associated with positive outcomes related to sexual behaviors, alcohol and tobacco use, and violence: being connected to parents or other family members. " UNICEF is acknowledging the importance of wholesome families in providing the key deterrents needed to curb sexual activity and violence in adolescences. According to congressional researchers, " children who have been orphaned by AIDS may be forced to leave school, engage in labor or prostitution, suffer from depression and anger, or engage in risky behavior like survival sex, making them vulnerable to contracting HIV. " This researcher continues by estimating that " over 40 million are currently living with HIV/AIDS, including nearly 3 million children under the age of 15. Ninety-five percent of those living with the virus reside in developing countries. In Africa, more than 7, 000 young people are infected every day, 2, 000 of whom are under the age of 15.

The U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) have estimated that at the end of 2001, 13. 4 million children under the age of 15 had lost one or both parents to AIDS, with the majority (82%) in sub-Saharan Africa. To help make this painfully clear, one Washington researcher made the following point " two million children lost their parents due to AIDS in 2000, orphaning a child every 14 seconds that year.

By 2010, it is expected that more than 25 million children will be orphaned by this deadly virus. " " AIDS has already orphaned more than 11 million African children, half of whom are between the ages of 10 and 14. The countries that will see a large increase in the number of orphans—Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland—are those with HIV prevalence levels already higher than previously thought possible, exceeding 30 per cent. In these three countries and Zimbabwe, more than one in five children wil be orphaned by 2010; more than 80 per cent of whom will have lost one or both parents due to AIDS.

By 2010, there will be approximately 20 million children in sub-Saharan Africa who have lost at least one parent to HIV/AIDS, bringing the total number of orphans in the region to 42 million. Other UN researchers estimate that " more than half of all orphans are adolescents ages 12 to 17;" all indicating that a significant portion of Africa's youth will have limited contact with healthy, responsible adults. If millions of children are expected to have limited contact with healthy, responsible adults; should the world wide church expect these same children to become committed Christian

adults, given the churches lack of involvement in their lives as children? All this can be very discouraging to a follower of Christ, but we must be reminded that our God has made us " more than conquerors. We should not be completely overwhelmed by these numbers, but be reminded of the following scripture; " Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

" –James 1: 27 According to Todd Phillips, the teaching pastor for young adults at McLean Bible Church, " there are some 2000 verses in the Bible which speak to God's heart for the poor and oppressed, directing us of our responsibility to spread the gospel by serving others in need. Likewise, author Douglas McConnell attempts to encourage action on the part of the church in his chapter on Changing Demographics by stating that " advocacy concerning the global atrocities of the sex and slave trade, child soldiers, orphans, child labor, children of war, street children, and a host of other abuses should become a priority for Christians worldwide. " In 2006, Paul Harvey published an essay entitled " If I were the Devil, this is what I would do. In an attempt to borrow from his creativity, if I were the Devil, this is what I'd do to stop the growth of the Christian faith. I'd … -Invent a deadly disease which is transmitted by physical touch -Kill off most of the responsible adults (parents, leaders and educators) in poor counties -Allow sexual predators to roam free and reek havoc on the defenseless -Convince the church that the problem is too big and that they can do nothing - Convince the remaining adults, relatives and leaders that the surveying children are cursed and helping them makes the adult vulnerable to that risk

-Convince the older children that the only way to survive is to exploit the younger, more defenseless ones In Ephesians 6: 12 we are instructed that our " struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, and against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. In light of this insight, we should give much thought to the fact that current projections for church growth is in the same geographic regions which are experiencing significant human devastation, especially among the most vulnerable people on earth, its children.

The alarming rate of child abandonment, child exploitation and child neglect is most likely the work of the enemy, and if left unchecked, he will succeed at devastating the infant and growing churches in these regions. According to McConnell, professing Christians account for " 360 million Africans, and 313 million Asians; while North America claims about 260 million believers. If we extrapolate these figures to the year 2025, and assume no great gains or losses through conversion, then there would be around 206 billion Christians, of whom 633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Many missionary organizations are focused on the people groups within the 10/40 Window, and rightfully so; but we should not neglect the children worldwide represented by the " 4/14 Window" which is defined as; " referring to the ages in which children are most likely to commit their lives to Christ as well as the ages in which they are most vulnerable.

" According to McConnell, " The sobering reality is that a child orphaned by the loss of her parents to AIDS shares the inalienable human dignity with a child soldier forced to become a murderer by armed rebels. Equally true is

that both children, the orphan and the soldier, as well as every human being, may be reconciled to God only through the Savior. " " Eight out of every 10 children who have lost parents to HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, about half of all orphans in the region are between 10-14 years old, 35 per cent are 5-9 years old, and about 15 per cent are 0-4. " These children are targets of opportunity to both the enemy and the church; for the enemy—targets for destruction, for the church—potential worshipers of God. " Suffer the little children to come unto Me.

" According to an article entitled Care for Orphans, Children Affected by HIV/AIDS, and Other Vulnerable Children, the author addresses the complexity of this matter by stating that " the impact of HIV/AIDS on children and their families is not a simple problem with an easy solution. The current situation is complex, interrelated on all levels of life, and cuts across all sectors of (International) development. Individual believers living out their faith in their work could impact the following areas: -Policy and Law—where " appropriate government policies are essential to protect orphans and other vulnerable children and their families; prohibiting discrimination to medical services, education, employment and housing; as well as protecting the inheritance rights of widows and orphans. " -Medical Care—" OVC's and their guardians need access to complete, relevant information and appropriate health care. " -Socioeconomic Support—" OVC's and their families are confronted with severe threats to their well-being including isolation, loss of income, access to education, shelter, nutrition, etc.

" -Psychological Support—" The psychological needs of children continue to be one of the most neglected areas of support. -Education—" The impact of

HIV/AIDS on the educational system has resulted in a decreasing number of teachers due to mortality, a growing number of children who are not able to attend or stay in school, and rising numbers of pupils whose ability to take advantage of schooling is undermined by other factors including poor nutrition and psychological stress. ” -Human Rights—“ Human rights-based approaches have been increasingly recognized as essential to the success of HIV prevention and care programs, including those working with children and adolescents. ” “ The 1997 and 2000 editions of Children on the Brink consolidated existing knowledge from a wide range of sources. According to both versions, interventions must include five basic strategies: (1) strengthen the capacity of families to cope with their problems; (2) mobilize and strengthen community-based responses; (3) increase the capacity of children and young people to meet their own needs through access to quality education, protection from exploitation and excessive labor, and building the capacity to care for themselves; (4) create an enabling environment for children and families through such activities as ensuring basic legal protection through laws and policies to protect women and children, decreasing stigma, and behavior change interventions; and (5) ensure that governments protect the most vulnerable and provide essential services. One important finding which is being communicated internationally “ emphasizes community care rather than institutional care: Long-term institutionalization of children in orphanages and other facilities is not a desirable solution to the impacts of HIV/AIDS.

Resources expended to fund institutional care for a single child can assist scores of children if used effectively to support a community-based initiative.

The institutionalization of children separates them from families and communities and often delays healthy childhood development. " A former orphan gave the following observation, "' I learned so many things,' he says of the orphanage. ' We were always studying, they were always teaching us. He pauses. ' But in the family you get the best education.

" More energy and resources should be dedicated to a community-based response or " community-based care—rather than giving a child a place to live, aid groups try to support them in their own villages—paying for school fees, for instance, or helping adoptive families with food aid. Organizations such as UNICEF say this is healthier and more culturally appropriate than moving children into institutions. " The United States once faced a similar crisis with large numbers of abandoned children living on the streets of New York and other large metropolitan cities only a few generations ago. Heart rending interviews captured on the video The Orphan Trains, detail their stories as many boys and girls were moved from large cities in the north and east to mid-western farms sometimes with loving families and other times to a childhood of servitude. One international organization which offers an excellent starting point from which a Christian lead organization could model is an Austria based NGO called SOS-Kinderdorf International; with some 233 Children's Villages in 85 countries. According to their website, " every SOS Children's Village offers a permanent home in a family-style environment to children who have lost their parents or can no longer live with them.

Four to ten boys and girls of different ages live together with their SOS mother in a family house; and eight to fifteen SOS Children's Village families form a village community. " At the center of SOS's success is the SOS

mother, a trained and paid full-time surrogate parent who is committed to a life time of service to a family of boys and girls. " Every SOS mother trainee completes two years of basic training. This is made up of at least three months of theoretical and twenty-one months of practical training – called on-the-job training. During the theoretical part the women are taught a wide variety of subjects covering the range of tasks (educational and sychological subjects, housekeeping, nutritional science, creative methods, etc.

). The children are free to depart the home once they are capable of living on their own, but are never forced to leave; instead they are encouraged to maintain a relationship with the SOS mother, brothers and sisters. " With the SOS Children's Village concept, our organization pioneered a family approach to the long-term care of orphaned and abandoned children. This concept is based on four principles: -The Mother (Each child has a caring parent)—As a child-care professional, she lives together with the children, guides their development, and runs her household independently. Brothers and Sisters (Family ties grow naturally)—Girls and boys of different ages live together as brothers and sisters, with natural brothers and sisters always staying within the same SOS family. -The House (Each family creates its own home)—The house is the family's home, with its own unique feeling, rhythm and routine.

Under its roof, the children enjoy a real sense of security and belonging. Children grow and learn together, sharing responsibilities and all the joys and sorrows of daily life. -The Village (The SOS family is a part of the community)—SOS families live together, forming a supportive village environment where children enjoy a happy childhood. The families share experiences and offer one another a helping hand. In addition to the four

principles, there are supporting facilities, " which are based around the SOS Children's Village itself.

These can be kindergartens, SOS Hermann Gmeiner Schools, vocational training centres, social centres, medical centres, etc. Supporting facilities are not only open to SOS Children's Village children and youths, but also to the local community. " The SOS credo is best expressed in their mission statement " we build families for children in need, we help them shape their own futures and we share in the development of their communities. " Conclusion The lives of children the world over are being devastated by living on their own and dealing with the exploitations of adults and older teens. The enemy is wreaking havoc in Asia and particularly Africa where millions of children are orphaned daily.

Christian researchers have termed the 4/14 Window as the ideal age group for reaching a young person for Christ. Additionally, secular and faith based organizations all recognize the importance of a healthy responsible family unit in the rearing of children. Millions of children would willingly dedicate their lives to the Christian faith, or any faith for that manner in exchange for a loving, caring home; saving them from the ravages of a cruel world. The Christian community should feel compelled to reach out to these little ones in the name of Christ and " make disciples of all nations. " Bibliography Blum, R. W.

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