
OVER THE MOUNTAIN JOURNAL

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Mission Makes Way for Orphans in Sudan

During daylight hours, heat shimmers in waves above the dusty red earth of Sudan. At night, the temperature drops drastically, leaching the warmth from the earth and prompting predators to begin their nocturnal hunt. The carnivores stalk the young and the weak—the most vulnerable of the region’s inhabitants—orphans displaced by a country ravaged by decades of violence.

Kimberly Smith, president and founder of Make Way Partners, has seen things most dare not imagine, and quotes statistics that seem inconceivable. In a 10-month period in 2006, 278 orphans died in an area of Sudan where her mission work is focused. The number-one cause of death was wild dog or hyena attack.

Mrs. Smith’s mission is to save orphans not only from animal attack and disease, but to keep at bay an even greater threat—child traffickers. Mrs. Smith said in Sudan, which is roughly a quarter of the size of the United States, it’s essential to protect the orphans and the only way to stop the self-perpetuating cycle of violence in the war-torn region. To do that, she and her husband, Milton, founded the mission to fight for the children.

According to Mrs. Smith, Make Way Partners focuses on those who are most vulnerable to human trafficking, yet also have the least help. To do that, the organization has developed a locally managed school, orphanage, church, medical clinic and slave repatriation ministry on the border of Darfur in Sudan.

Initially, though the orphans were being educated and fed, the mission had no way to shelter them at night to protect them.

“When we realized how many were dying every day, we realized we were saving them from the slave trader and educating them by day, only to have them be eaten by hyenas at night,” Mrs. Smith said. “We had to have the orphanages to protect them. Since we moved them into



Kimberly Smith, president and founder of Make Way Partners that operates the only indigenous orphan care network in Sudan, has devoted her life to saving children from human trafficking and its devastating consequences.

the orphanages, not one child has died for any reason.”

The mission work of Make Way Partners was begun by the Smiths when their eyes were opened to the existence of human trafficking.

“We kept praying about it, and we knew we had to do this,” Mrs. Smith said. “You cannot see this kind of evil and suffering and not do something about it. You can’t say it’s too dangerous for me to get involved.”

To determine where their efforts were most needed, the Smiths evaluated the areas where children would be at the greatest risk, where civil unrest and dire poverty converged with the remoteness of location to make it difficult for aid workers to provide relief. That place is Sudan.

From grassroots beginnings, Make Way Partners has grown to an organization with a budget of \$2 million per year. The mission, with 100 indigenous employees in the Sudanese area, has three orphanages on a 100-acre compound on the border of Darfur. About 500 children are served by the orphanage.

In a Make Way Partners newsletter, Mrs. Smith quotes a Bible verse from the book of Colossians imploring Christians to “clothe themselves with compassion.”

Though she wears a simple black dress, elegant on her tall, slim frame, Mrs. Smith, no matter what her clothing, is always garbed in compassion. She speaks frankly, with a sincerity born of the certain knowledge of suffering in the world—suffering on a level few can relate to. She seems to measure her words, at times, to be sure the

listener is prepared for the devastating stories she tells of abuse and inhumanity—stories she has learned firsthand from survivors in Darfur.

The Journey

Before becoming a missionary, Smith was a minister and Mrs. Smith worked with New South Federal Savings. Ten years ago, they took their 11 and 12-year-old daughters and set out on the mission project that led them to Make Way Partners.

“We had agreed we would go on a mission trip when our children were older,” she said. “We decided to go to the Iberian peninsula earlier than we planned. God really got hold of me, and we sold our home, gave away our furniture and moved.”

When the Smiths left behind their careers and worldly goods to do mission work, it was with the thought that they could make a difference in the world. Instead, it was only the beginning. While in Spain, the Smiths learned of a couple masquerading as a foster family.

“The couple were preying on the innocent children,” Mrs. Smith said. “They were victimizing them, selling them into prostitution, filming them in sexual acts and selling the films on the Internet. The story finally broke for us when one of the children who was abused came to us for help.”

After a two-year court battle, the children were removed from the intolerable situation, and the Smiths were moved to begin new work. They took a deep breath and reexamined their roles and their goal.

“Fighting through that case not only liberated those children but awakened my husband and me to the severity of the problem,” Mrs. Smith said. “We researched trafficking. We didn’t know anything about ‘Who is most vulnerable?’ or ‘Where are they coming from? Where they are going to? Where is the most likely place to be trafficked to? Who is behind it?’”

The Mission

As they worked through that initial crisis and took stock of the darkness that was a reality for many children in the world, they felt led to go where they could intervene before the children were taken at all.

Mrs. Smith said that she had never even heard the term “human trafficking,” but suddenly her eyes were open to a very real, prevalent and pervasive problem in the world.

“I was praying about what the Lord wanted me to do and what my response should be,” she said. “And then I knew. I identified with that, and I realized, ‘This is the reason that I’m alive.’” Discovering her purpose in life, Mrs. Smith worked to

form an organization specifically committed to preventing human trafficking.

“The first case involved rescue, and it was good to get them out, but how much better would it be to keep those children from ever being taken,” she said. “Statistics show trafficking is growing faster in Africa and eastern Europe than anywhere. And nothing is really being done in those areas.”

The couple has taken their ministry to areas in Eastern Europe, such as Romania, but the ministry has truly flourished in the Sudan, where Mrs. Smith feels called to make a lasting impact.

Sudan, Africa’s largest country, has been sundered by ethnic and religious violence, particularly in the Darfur province in western Sudan. In Darfur, approximately 2.7 million people have been displaced in recent years.

With the formation of Make Way Partners, the Smiths channeled their energy into protecting children, not only from trafficking, but also from famine and disease.

Making a Way

Heading up the mission work for Make Way Partners in Africa is James Lual Atak, one of the original “lost boys of Sudan”—more than 27,000 boys between the ages of 4 and 15 who were displaced or orphaned during the civil war that raged between Arab forces in north Sudan and indigenous Africans in the south from 1983 to 2005.

“God has just really blessed us with what has happened in the Sudan,” Mrs. Smith said. “We have had leaders come alongside to help.”

In an area ravaged by war and rife with broken families and orphans, the cycle of violence is perpetuated by both physical and psychological damage to young children.

Through inconceivable acts of violence, the radical regimes causing the upheaval are destroying families and villages, persecuting their victims and leaving them with deep emotional wounds that dehumanize the children.

“Many times the children, both girls and boys, are taken away as slaves,” Mrs. Smith said. “I had been told the worst place on the planet was the Sudan—Darfur specifically. I could not comprehend that until I saw it for myself.”

Make Way Partners is able to care for the children through an adopt-a-child program. For \$105 a month, a family can sponsor a child, providing “food, housing, education, medical care, 24-hour security and loving care with an emphasis on healing their inner wounds,” Mrs. Smith explained.

The program’s success is due largely to the leanness of its operational budget. One hundred percent of

sponsorship funds go directly to care for the child.

“No administration fees are ever taken out of these life-saving gifts,” Mrs. Smith said. “Ninety-two percent of our general undesignated donations goes directly to the field.”

The administrative costs and overhead, including funding seven employees stateside, comes from the remaining eight percent of the undesignated donations. The other percentage is used to expand the mission.

“We have just acquired an additional 200 acres near the border of Uganda, where we will protect children from being forced to become child soldiers and sex slaves,” Mrs. Smith said. “We are currently accepting funds for this project. We are clearing this land now and preparing it for development to begin building in 2010.

“We are the only indigenous orphan care network in the entire country, and we are very aggressively trying to build as many units as we can. We’ve finished our third orphanage now, and we’ve been working in earnest only four years.”

In May, Mrs. Smith will return to Sudan for the opening of the third orphanage. To make construction possible, supplies were trucked from Nairobi to build the orphanage in Darfur, which Mrs. Smith equates to driving from the Florida Keys to New York with a truckload of supplies and no roads.

“This project has truly been a miracle,” Mrs. Smith said. “It has grown my faith so much. At first, everyone said we couldn’t build an orphanage on the border of Darfur. It’s 2,000 miles away from the nearest supply chain. There is nowhere to get nails or wood or bricks. In a country one quarter the size of the United States, there is less than three miles of pavement.”

In order to build a tight-knit community, Make Way Partners also funds a free school for children who are not orphans. The mission has dug wells, set up a free medical clinic and stretched its reach into the heart of the region, working with the area’s people.

“Christians and Muslims work in peace together,” Mrs. Smith said. “We have a Muslim doctor living with (our missionary) and overseeing distribution. It’s a beautiful partnership.”

Funding for Make Way Partners began locally from many who funded the Smiths’ first ministry to Spain, then continued to help as their focus turned to preventing child trafficking.

“It was the grace of God that we got the support we did,” she said. “We never had governmental funding. In the early days, people in Alabama donated all of the funds with about 80 percent coming from Birmingham. “In the past five to six years, God has done incredible work. We now have a \$2 million budget, and we have

support from about 35 states and from England, Australia and other areas in Europe. Five years ago, our budget was \$100,000.



Before immersing themselves in mission work, Milton Smith was a minister, and Kimberly Smith worked in banking. Ten years ago, they and their daughters set out on a mission that eventually led them to Sudan.

The organization aims to educate and mobilize Christians around the world in the effort to end human trafficking and modern-day slavery.

Make Way Partners has been accredited by the Virginia-based Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, an organization that examines responsible stewardship, including financial accountability.

“People feel good about giving to an organization like that,” she said. “They know the money they give is going to feed orphans. We are not payroll-ing a monster-sized organization. We really feed the orphans. We focus on them, because they are the most vulnerable to human trafficking.”

Mrs. Smith said Make Way Partners is able to be effective, because it focuses on the native people, keeping close ties with those who have a vested interest in seeing their lives improve.

She believes the most important work may be in stopping the cycle of violence by showing the devastated children that there is love in the world and a different path for life.

She explained, “You have 6-year-old little boys who are so angry and say, ‘They killed our fathers. We will kill their fathers...’

“You can change that by years of loving them and giving to them. As the healing begins in them, it can change the future of the country. With a million orphans who will be leading the country one day, the more we can heal these children, the more successful we will be in healing these lawless lands. You have to go deeper and start bringing in healing ministries to the children and change the next generation.”

Mrs. Smith thinks healing is the only hope for Darfur. The mission's work extends to a repatriation program to help women who have been victims of violence or who have been enslaved to heal, too. The program helps build them houses and give them jobs.

"We train the local leadership for them to do the work and to train others," she said. "We have a missionary, Kevin Massey, and he and his wife live there most of the time."

Massey not only has much-needed skills, but oversees all logistics on getting supplies from nearly 2,000 miles away over hostile terrain with no roads, bridges, gas stations or rest stops. He also oversees the construction process of buildings in the compounds.

"After five decades of war in the Sudan, they have lost the art of building," Mrs. Smith said. "They don't know how to do it."

Massey oversees building projects and trains local laborers to do the jobs, giving them a skill they can use as an indirect result of creating the buildings necessary for the mission's work.

"Kevin trains them and then lets the locals take over," Mrs. Smith said. "That's important, too, because the work we're doing cannot just collapse because we're not there."

Until last year, Mrs. Smith was spending half a year in Sudan, but as the ministry has grown stateside, she has been called back to administer the growing organization. Make Way Partners also is doing work in Romania.

"Now I probably spend three months every year there," Mrs. Smith said. "My husband and I considered part of what our job needed to be was educational until we were hit smack in the face with this in the Iberian peninsula. I had no idea about human trafficking. It was startling to me. We felt like our job in the states is educational—to create awareness of the problems going on in this part of the world. Basically, Americans are good and giving people, but first they have to hear about the problem."

Mrs. Smith said the troubled economic environment in America today is a definite concern when children in the Sudan are in such desperate need of donations.

"When we started having financial trouble in the U.S. months ago, I was concerned about the adoption program," she said. "I thought, that will probably be the first thing people cut when times are hard. We have one couple that sponsors five children, and they said to me, 'If God had blessed us with five children and the economy collapsed, we would still find a way to take care of our children. We will still take care of these children.'"

The keys to a successful mission are first to make people aware of such problems, then to prove yourself

as a trustworthy answer to the problem, Mrs. Smith said.

"People need to know about viable ministries that can make an impact," Mrs. Smith said. "The lesson that I've learned in how you go from a small ministry to doubling every year is proving yourself to be trustworthy and educating people. Once they know about the problem and how they can help, people respond. It's very humbling to be part of something like that."

The mission work is not without its difficult decisions. Orphans cry at the door, wanting to come in, but Atak and Mrs. Smith have to focus on the children they can protect. (See sidebar below.)

"The key to building more orphanages is child sponsorships," Mrs. Smith said. "We can only take as many children as we have sponsors for. We have to be able to sustain them."

To bring in more children than the orphanage can care for would be to risk the well-being of the children they already are saving. Mrs. Smith says it is an excruciating choice to turn a child away, but Make Way Partners is the only orphanage taking in the Darfur refugee orphans and the reality is that resources are finite.

"Things like that make you want to cry out," Mrs. Smith said. "There are enough resources to save these children. If every family just saved one child...."

"I know we have poor people in this country, but what we call poverty here is nothing like the level you see there. We are talking about people literally killing each other over one bag of grain. We don't have that kind of deprivation in this country."

A Lasting Partnership

Seeing the children transform under their care is one of the strongest motivations to take risks for Make Way Partners.

"The first couple of years, it was sad to see the children," she said. "They would pull back if you tried to touch them. They were so traumatized. There was no laughter. Now they live in a compound with volleyball nets and soccer fields. They know how to play and live. In a country that has been at war for five decades, play is a lost art."

Mrs. Smith said the children will stay in the orphanages through sixth grade, then they will be introduced to trade school to learn other things lost to years of strife.

"Because of the war, agriculture has been lost," Mrs. Smith said. "Woodworking has been lost. Building has been lost. We can teach them how to have an irrigation system. Things like that mean the kids not only have an education, but have been equipped with practical skills."

The Hoover-based organization already has five other locations targeted in Africa for future facilities, but it

won't acquire the land until they are ready to build. The facilities are basic—no running water or electricity—in keeping with the lean budget and difficult building conditions.

When people learn about Mrs. Smith's mission, they wonder at her ability to travel and work in such a desperate part of the world. What she does has a host of inherent risks. Mrs. Smith was recently hospitalized for almost two weeks with a fever of 104 degrees—some unidentified bug picked up in Sudan. But disease is only a small part of the risk she takes.

"I'm scared all of the time," she said. "Sure I am. I'm a coward by nature."

An incident on one trip made her aware of her high visibility in the area. She and other workers had driven several hours from the orphanage on the border when they encountered a soldier. When she stepped out of the truck, he said, "Hello, Kimberly."

Someone she had never met was well aware of who she was and what work she was doing.

"I thought, how does this soldier know my name?," she said. "It put things into perspective. I'm not a young woman any more. I've led a good life. My children are grown. I get afraid, but what really comforts me is that through the help of people that send me there, we are saving the lives of children who would either be dead or in slavery today. And if there's something worth dying for, that's it."

For information on how to help, visit the Web site at www.makewaypartners.org.

Sidebar: THE FACE OF SUFFERING

Kimberly Smith well knows mission work can be as heartbreaking as it is rewarding.

"The hardest thing I ever have had to do in this whole thing happened last September," Mrs. Smith said. "I was driving to a Darfur refugee camp with a group to show them what it was like. We were leaving the orphanage and its 100 acres and clean water, food, schools, safe homes. We went to the refugee camp and in contrast, you see 22,000 people in terrible conditions. Two babies will die every day because there is not enough clean water. That does not include starvation and disease. We drove along, and suddenly saw a little boy—about two feet tall with a shirt on with only one button and no other clothes. He was standing in the middle of nowhere like a little scarecrow. James (Atak—the head of the orphanage) and I went to talk to him to ask how he got there and where he came from. He was not crying. He was stoic, and he told us his story."

The child's father died before he knew him, and his mother stopped eating to give her food to him and his baby sister. First his sister, then his mother died.

"We asked him to let us take him back to the refugee

camp, but he wouldn't go because his mother told him slave raiders come to the refugee camps," Mrs. Smith said. "He said, 'I don't want to be a slave.' And he was only 4 or 5."

Mrs. Smith turned to her companion, Atak, with the knowledge of a recent discussion about being realistic in regard to the mission's abilities to care for the children.

"Just a few days before, I had gotten back to the orphanage, and I was surprised to see 50 new orphans that James had brought in," Mrs. Smith said. "I told him we were barely able to keep the budget and did not have sponsors for all of these children. We had to be sure we were able to take care of the ones we had. I made him promise not to take more orphans."

Atak reminded her of the promise as they stood beside the half-clothed child—even as Mrs. Smith asked to take in just one more. Only one day before, Atak wept as he made the promise not to take in any more orphans.

"I could not ask James to override what I made him promise to do," she said. "I realized that when I am gone, every day, he has orphans come to the gate crying to get in. And he has to turn them away. It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but we gave (the child) a blanket and all of the food we had with us. (John the child) smiled. We left. James and I both cried."

The response Mrs. Smith has gotten online to her story of little John is overwhelming—families want her to return for that small boy and take him in and sponsor him. She has to explain that to get to little John, she and Atak would have to step over other orphans, lined up, crying outside the fence—knowing safety and food lie on the other side.

To bring in more children than the orphanage can care for would be to risk the well being of the children they already are saving. It is an excruciating choice. But Make Way Partners is the only orphanage taking in the Darfur refugee orphans and the reality is that resources are finite.

As Mrs. Smith explained the small boy's plight, she did so pragmatically, but the grief for that child and all of the others in need is clear.

"Things like that make you want to cry out," Mrs. Smith said. "There are enough resources to save these children. If every family just saved one child. There are more families in this country than there are orphans in the world.

"I know we have poor people in this country, but what we call poverty here is nothing like the level you see there. We are talking about people literally killing each other over one bag of grain. We don't have that kind of deprivation in this country."