

WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL MISSION

Global Women Sponsoring Global Children

by Ana Gobledale

“As apostles of Christ, ...we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.”
—1 Thessalonians: 2:7 NRSV

When you think of “global women” involved in international mission, of who do you think?

Do you think of international missionaries? I know I do... I think of the older generations, women like Global Ministries missionary Betty Frank who has worked and lived in Turkey for many years. Or Xuyen Dangers who grew up in Vietnam and lives and works in Laos. I think of the younger generation, women like my niece, Lucy, who grew up in Chicago and San Salvador, speaks English with a Spanish accent, and is currently studying in Brazil... in Portuguese! I think of my daughter, Thandiwe, who grew up in South Africa and Zimbabwe and currently lives and works in India.

But these well-traveled women represent only one group of “global women” involved in international mission. There is another entire network of “global

women” who do not necessarily ever leave their home state. Instead, they reach out around the globe from their homes and churches in the USA, with love and commitment, and impact the lives of hundreds of children. I am thinking of the women who sponsor children through the Global Ministries Child Sponsorship Program.

I am going to share some of the voices of these “global women” who sponsor “global children.” We will also hear from Thandiwe, currently a Global Mission Intern living and working at the Family Village Farm where many Global Ministries sponsored children live.

Stepping up—Why?

The reasons for stepping up as a child sponsor vary. My family took on a child through sponsorship in 2000 when I joined the Cleveland Global Ministries staff, so I could see how the system worked. For others, there may be a connection with a place or a person.

One sponsor explains how her personal roots influenced her decision, “When the opportunity came up for me to sponsor an Armenian girl, I became involved. I am a physician and grew up with strong Armenian heritage through my mother. I am well aware of the history of the Armenian people and the country and wanted to give back to a disadvantaged Armenian girl.”

Another sponsor writes of a personal connection with the founder of the Family Village Farm in India, Dr. Pauline King. “I knew Pauline from the mid-1960’s when The Family Village Farm was just





a dream. Pauline stayed with us for ten days while visiting churches. I kept up with her until her death. My joy has been in continued contact with the institution that she founded and of which I've been a supporter from the beginning. I have used Pauline as an example in many a sermon; so it's natural that I have encouraged Child Sponsorship there."

A third sponsor describes a life-transforming experience of her own that motivated her to sponsor a child in China. "It [child sponsorship] always sounded like a neat idea, but I never actually wrote the check until [my daughter] and I went to China with a Global Ministries women's group, and visited the dedication of a new school sponsored by Global Ministries in Chengdu, Henan; an area that's been devastated by AIDS (acquired from donation/selling blood). These children and their families have so little! And they honored us with songs, dances, and speeches, and were excited and happy like all children everywhere when good things happen. All I could think of was how many of these kids I could give a chance in life, just by writing a check. They were all so eager to work hard and valued the chance to stay in school. It was exciting and compelling to be with them."

Getting Involved...How Far?

International Child Sponsorship is a tricky business. Financially, the Global Ministries Sponsorship Program is set up brilliantly, with 100% of the sponsor's donation going directly to the sponsorship center where the child lives; the

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sponsorship program staff in Cleveland is supported by other funds. But there are other ethical dilemmas. How involved should the sponsors be in the lives of their sponsored children? Is hands-off the best policy? "I've been hesitant about writing to her [the child I sponsor]. I'm uncomfortable with the role of benefactor. I don't want to make her feel like she owes me gratitude, because I'm just helping her do what she has a right to," comments one sponsor.

Or should centers encourage correspondence and even visits? Thandiwe, working at M.B.K.G. Pannai (Family Village Farm) in India writes, "I have been very surprised by how present the sponsors are here. For the children, knowing they mean something to someone and that someone is thinking about them means a lot. When I first arrived the questions most frequently asked of me by the children, other than my own name, were my parents' names and, for those sponsored by individuals in the United States, whether or not I knew their sponsors. One boy, who is now grown up and studying for his Master's degree in Pharmacology, has a file full of long letters and colorful cards from "Aunt Betty and Uncle Roger" in the U.S. sharing their lives and experiences with him. In almost every prayer, children, mothers, wardens and the Director lift up sponsors around the world. Sponsors matter, and they are not just a signature on the bottom of a check. This has come as a real surprise and pleasure to me."

Some centers make sure the children write, at least annually, to their sponsors. At the MBKG Pannai (Family Village Farm), Reena, the Sponsorship Coordinator and Homes Supervisor, is a committed Christian who finds her faith very important. Reena "corresponds with the sponsors, ensures that letters are delivered to sponsored children, distributes gifts sent by sponsors, signs forms regarding money needed for and by the children and mothers who

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live here, meets regularly with the cottage and nursery mothers as well as the wardens." Other centers, perhaps simply because they do not have the personnel or finances to support someone like Reena, do not ensure regular communication.

So some sponsors "get lucky" and benefit from a deepening relationship with the child they sponsor. Some even manage to visit their sponsored child. Others feel frustrated at the lack of contact. And yet others wish to remain anonymous. But, whatever the case, each sponsor represents a high level of commitment to make a difference in a child's life, a commitment that motivates them to enter into uncertain relationships with strangers and continue writing checks and letters, often unanswered, through the years. As one sponsor shared, "My family and I are not currently involved with the church. (It has been years since we attended.) But my commitment to the Child Sponsorship Program has continued."

One sponsor shares candidly, "My hope had been to correspond with the child but that has proved to be too difficult. This has been challenging and not rewarding the way I had hoped it would have been. To be honest, I don't feel that the program has met my needs, but I continue to sponsor the child as I don't want to let her down. In my heart, whether I hear from her or not, I know I am helping a life far away and different than my own or my own two children." Another shares, "The one disappointment is that Delina*, the girl I sponsor, never acknowledges our letters or gifts. We assume she receives them, but we never know. I completely

realize the huge logistics of helping sponsors keep in touch, and they do a wonderful job [sending out] regular letters, pictures, and drawings from Delina, plus the newsletter from the home." (Note: some centers distribute gifts amongst all the children, sponsored or not, so no one is left out, often waiting until there is something for every child. This means the sponsored child might not personally benefit from a sent gift, but even more children will be impacted by a generous sponsor. Thandiwe explains, "Some of the gifts may be given to the child on their birthday or another special event, but only if each child can receive a gift. Clothing may be reserved for Christmas or another holiday when all the children receive new clothes.")

The "Global Girls"

And who are the children sponsored by these "global women"? Who are these "global girls" and boys whose pictures hang on hundreds of USA refrigerators? Thandiwe introduces two of the girls at M.B.K.G. Pannai (Family Village Farm)...

Nisha* is a tiny boisterous five-year old. She and her twin sister stay in the nursery and during playtime they are inseparable—sharing a swing or a seat on the merry-go-round. Nisha and her sister come from a Muslim family, unusual here as most of the children come from Hindu or Christian families. As a single parent, Nisha's mother sought assistance so her daughters will get three meals a day, new clothes two or three times a year, shelter, medical care and an education. This is far more material security than she could ever offer them. Nisha and her sister attend Upper Kindergarten (the equivalent of a second year of preschool) where they bring their energy!

Amitha* laughs and bickers with the other children as she swings on the cheerful yellow swing set. When Amitha was two, her father abandoned the family. Her mother, who works as a part-time manual laborer, has to leave the children alone when she goes to work, so she applied to have Amitha admitted here. Now six years old, Amitha lives in

**Names and identifying details have been changed for publication.*

the 6th Cottage with Amudha Amma (amma means mother) and six other children, and she attends first standard at King's Matriculation School.

Thandiwe writes, "One of the things I enjoy most is catching the moments of tenderness and care between mothers and children and among the children themselves, when I watch a mother putting a flower in one of her cottage girl's hair or I see an older child pick up a nursery baby, and there is such affection and love in those actions."

Going Global Together

In many cases, as at Faith UCC in Altoona, Pennsylvania, the entire congregation, or a group within the congregation, sponsors a child, sharing the global experience throughout the membership. A comment from Altoona's minister demonstrates the importance of this global mission project, "The Child Sponsorship Program is very important to me. Besides my own church, I've 'steered' the Women's Fellowship of the Association and Conference to sponsor a child or children." My church in Australia shares a "Blessing Bowl" each Sunday, into which anyone who has a joy or concern to share places a dollar or two when sharing. This simple community act brings us together and financially supports two boys in India. For ideas on how to benefit as a congregation through child sponsorship, contact Linda Lawrence at 216-736-3222, or email, lawrencl@ucc.org.

The Rewards

Why do women go global and sponsor children on the other side of the world? Perhaps it's the same faith that inspired Pauline King, the founder of Family Village Farm to say, "I can't do everything, but I can do something." When asked, "What has been for you the most rewarding part of sponsoring a child?" one sponsor replied, "Seeing her picture on the fridge every morning and knowing she'll go to school today." And it is knowing that behind that picture is a place, supported by the church, full of people who provide a home of love for the children.

As one sponsor shared through her favorite Bible

verse, "We know all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." (Romans 8:28 NRSV)



Ana Gobledale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and now Australia where she and her husband, Tod, are chaplains and lecturers at Churches of Christ Theological College.

Prayer requests

- 🙏 For all the women, families and church groups involved in international mission through child sponsorship;
- 🙏 For the staff at the centers, especially for Reena at MBKG Pannai (Family Village Farm) who has completed a Masters in Biochemistry and is currently pursuing a Masters of Psychology through a correspondence course;
- 🙏 For all the children supported with love and money through Child Sponsorship programs;
- 🙏 For Linda Lawrence who oversees the Global Ministries Child Sponsorship Program.

Reflection questions

1. What have your experiences been with Child Sponsorship?
2. How might your congregation benefit from Child Sponsorship, or, if you are already sponsoring a child, how might you share that joy and commitment more widely through your congregation?
3. While sponsorship helps to feed, clothe and educate a child, consider what you can do to help eradicate the situations in our world that lead to poverty.
4. What are the needs of children in your community and how can you have a positive impact on them?