

Star Shine Kaelo Working Group, Kenya, July 2016 - July 2018

in Shared Partnership with Pisgah, Troy, and Maxwell Street
Presbyterian Churches of Kentucky.

Through this ZOE Project, we are supporting 34 households and a total of 119 children in Kenya. The ages of the orphaned and vulnerable children in the ZOE program range between infant and college age; however, the youth who is the head of household must be old enough to manage a small business and so is usually between the ages of 14 and 21. Some of the children in Kenya's program are living with an elderly grandparent or caregiver who is disabled or otherwise unable to care for the children. It is often the case that such arrangements include shelter only and the caregiver is unable to provide food, education, health care or other support which children need. Child rights are especially important in such situations so that the children are not abused. Please note, children joining the ZOE program are living in extreme poverty situations. Often they have no parents or birth documentation and have suffered multiple traumas in their young lives. Occasionally the children give conflicting information on their names and ages. Additional orphans are frequently adopted by groups, and a small percentage of children will leave the group due to family reunification or other reasons. Over the next three years, we will be working with this new extended family in a variety of ways. Here are the two items that will be our focus this first year.

Focus on: Faith

Often the isolation that the children feel when they begin the ZOE program extends to their thoughts about God. Because they are abused and discriminated against by their community - and often this includes Christians in their village - they believe God has also abandoned or even cursed them. At other times they believe that maybe God does not exist, or if God does exist that they are somehow beyond God's love. In the very first meeting the staff often address the Lord's prayer with the children, and talk about what it means, as an orphan, to call God "Father." They learn that they are not truly orphans because they have their heavenly Father who loves them. ZOE shares the gospel with these children, but this sharing goes beyond words to deeds. The children both hear and see the very best of the Christian message, and often respond to this in inspirational ways. At each meeting they begin with Scripture readings, prayer and devotions given by a group member, but while this is available to the children they are never coerced into the Christian faith. ZOE's program is religiously non-restrictive, but offers a compelling view of the love Christians show to others. One of the most powerful parts of the empowerment program is the way these children put their faith into action in their own community. They forgive those who have harmed them; feed others who are even poorer than themselves; adopt other children and share their resources and knowledge with them; pray and care for one another; and pay fair wages to those who had once taken advantage of their situation with hard labor and poor pay. These children return good for evil and can be examples to all of what it means to live our faith.

Focus on: First Connections

One of the biggest disadvantages orphans and vulnerable children face is isolation from peers and the larger community. Struggling on their own, the children lack moral support, access to community resources, and a network of people to help them progress and face challenges. ZOE creates connections.

Peer group. Even though there may be hundreds of orphans and vulnerable children living in a community or village, they often self-segregate because of the conditions of their poverty, disease, and/or the stigma of HIV/AIDS. When each new member tells their story during the first working group meeting, they are greatly encouraged to find that there are others who share their same struggles. Then ZOE introduces the children to young people who already graduated from or have made significant progress through ZOE's empowerment program and the new ZOE participants are inspired and energized to begin the work of transformation.

Program facilitator and mentor. Each working group is assigned a program facilitator/social worker. These ZOE staff members usually speak the mother tongue of the region, hold a diploma in social work or related fields and have experience working with children. Additionally, the working group members select a person from the local community to serve as a mentor and advocate for the children within the community. Mentors receive training from ZOE and then attend weekly meetings, make home visits and help ZOE resolve challenges the group may face in the community. And a powerful connection is us! All ZOE working groups know the opportunities they receive are from God, through the love and concern coming from their partners far away. They are amazed that you would care for them without ever having met them. This powerful connection is further strengthened when a Hope Companion visits the children to witness what they have achieved. In many ways you stand in place of their parents, and to hear that you are proud of what they have accomplished is transformative for these children. Thank you for being a part of building God's Kingdom in this way.