The Foundation and the Association François-Xavier Bagnoud honor the memory of François-Xavier, a gifted helicopter rescue pilot who lost his life in 1986 in Mali at the age of twenty-four. His mother, the Countess Albina du Boisrouvray, joined with her son’s family and friends to found both organizations in his name. The Foundation supports initiatives in François-Xavier’s fields of interest, including aerospace, rescue, and community life in the Valais region of Switzerland. The Association undertakes a range of humanitarian initiatives focused on children and HIV/AIDS. The Association’s operations are independent of the Foundation and require co-financing from other sources.

Francois-Xavier Bagnoud

ORPHAN ALERT
International perspectives on children left behind by HIV/AIDS

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Transitioning from institutional care of orphans to community-based care: 
*The experience of Ethiopia’s Jerusalem Association Children’s Homes*

Mulugeta Gebru and Rebecca Atnafou

Jerusalem Association Children’s Homes was founded in 1985 as an indigenous NGO in response to the needs of Ethiopian children who were orphaned by civil war, drought, and the resulting famine of 1984. JACH established four residential institutions for children during the height of the orphan emergency in the 1980s.

In 1996, JACH made the decision to transition from institutionalized child care to community-based care. Guided by a six-year strategic plan for the transition, JACH has shifted its focus to promoting child-focused, sustainable development in communities near JACH children’s homes.

**Why de-institutionalize orphan care?**

A number of JACH’s experiences during its first ten years of caring for orphans contributed to the 1996 decision to de-institutionalize. As the years passed and the children in JACH homes grew, JACH staff observed that the children had little knowledge about their society and the world at large due to their lack of exposure to community life. Many orphans felt alienated from their nonorphaned classmates. Some orphans exhibited aggressive behavior in school, partly because they were labeled as orphans and mocked by other students.

Children who had grown up in the institutions had little trust of others and limited knowledge of social norms and values. When they ‘graduated’ and left the institutions, many of the orphans had a difficult time sustaining themselves because they had no networks of family and community on which to rely and inadequate coping skills for ‘real world’ challenges.

In addition, the costs of residential care were high. JACH staff recognized that the organization could assist many more orphaned children if it employed alternatives to institutional care. In light of the huge number of children projected to be orphaned by HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s and thereafter into the 21st century, JACH became convinced that it was imperative to shift to a community-based approach.

**The process of de-institutionalization**

JACH’s board and management consulted with local authorities and with JACH’s partner organizations to develop a strategic plan for de-institutionalization. One of the earliest elements of the plan was enabling children to travel to their birthplaces during school holidays to trace their families and relatives. Older children accompanied the younger children on their trips. Children were encouraged to visit marketplaces, churches, and other sites where large numbers of people congregate to begin their search. The children documented their findings on a form provided by JACH.

This approach was remarkably successful in reuniting children with families. Of 1,000 orphans, some 285 children found families and relatives. Twenty-five children even found biological parents who had no idea that their children were alive. In some instances, foster parents, a new concept in Ethiopia, agreed to accept the children. All families were provided with a grant of 2,000 birr (equivalent to US$250) to cover resettlement costs for the reunified child. (In contrast, it cost over 5,500 birr per year to care for a child housed at JACH). Reunified children were assigned JACH social workers to monitor their adjustment in their new families.

While the younger children were receptive to the idea of reunification, most of the orphans aged 15 and over wanted something different: independent living as self-reliant citizens. An earlier attempt to enable the older children to become self-supporting by setting up small income generating projects for them was deemed a failure because the young people were not involved in formulating the projects. JACH used a new
appreciate the opportunity to learn about their roots and their identity. The children too eventually understood and accepted the de-institutionalization initiative.

Next steps

To date, JACH has reunified and reintegrated 810 children. The success of de-institutionalization has allowed JACH to close one home. Only 190 children reside in the three remaining homes. No additional children are accepted into these homes. In the near future, JACH plans to reintegrate all the children and close all the homes.

The need for orphan care has grown again in recent years because of the resurgence of conflict with Eritrea, drought, famine, and the HIV/AIDS crisis. JACH is working with communities in both rural and urban areas of the country to facilitate community development and to reinvigorate traditional mechanisms of caring for orphans.

JACH is sharing its experience of de-institutionalization through a national network of organizations working in support of orphans. A number of Ethiopian orphanages are beginning to follow JACH’s example. The national effort to shift from institutionalized child care to community-based care is gathering momentum.

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