How Shall We Care for Haiti’s Orphans?

By Emily Brennan | January 8, 2013

Port-au-Prince, Haiti — Just days after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, Chris Savini, then a mental health worker, heard from his Illinois church about a doctor who was forming a makeshift clinic here. For Savini, the decision to join the mission was easy. “I was called,” he said. “It was undeniable.”

Now a full-time missionary, he shuttles back and forth from the States with his wife, gathering donations from his church, friends, and family for organizations like Mission Une Seule Famille en Jesus Christ, an orphanage in the city’s outskirts where he teaches music. The October evening Savini spoke to me, children and teenagers were lining up for dinner—peanut butter on yucca bread—in the orphanage’s courtyard. They lingered by the kitchen, its generator the only source of electric light in the compound, which included a school and the cinder block skeleton of a half-finished church. The quake damaged an already unreliable electrical grid, and even now only about 25 percent of Haitians have some access to electricity, according to a 2012 World Bank report. Whole swathes of Port-au-Prince sit in darkness.

Orphanages number in the hundreds across Haiti, running the gamut from well-run institutions to hovels. And many American evangelical Christians devote their time and resources to them, seeing the care of orphans as a tenet of their faith, even a biblical imperative (they often cite verses like James 1:27 that direct Christians to “visit the fatherless”). Over the past decade, orphan care, as some Christian leaders call it, has become a popular ministry for thousands of evangelical churches across the United States, coalescing in nationwide public awareness days like Orphan Sunday and organizations like the Christian Alliance for Orphans.

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Adoption has been a focus of the movement. Russell D. Moore, author of *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches*, believes it has grown out of evangelicals’ anti-abortion efforts. “Evangelicals asked, ‘How do we minister to women to prevent abortions?’” he told me over the phone. “Several of us found ourselves caring for orphans, and it’s been coming together since then.” But advocates do not only argue for domestic adoption. As a growing number of churches look beyond the States and launch ministries abroad, particularly programs aimed at alleviating poverty in the developing world, several influential Christian leaders have promoted international adoption. Among them is Russell Warren, who has challenged members of his Saddleback Church to adopt 500 children. Standing beside Warren at a conference last May, his wife, Kay, was unequivocal that adoption, not orphanages, was the solution. “The answer to the 168 million orphans in our world can be summed up in those two words: family and church,” she said. “There are 2.4 billion people who name the name of Jesus Christ on this planet, and there are 168 million orphans. You do the math.”

But the vast majority of children in Haiti’s orphanages are not actually orphans. Of the roughly 30,000 children in Haitian institutions and the hundreds adopted by foreigners each year, the Haitian government estimates that 80 percent have at least one living parent. And evidence of this fact has led some evangelicals to rethink their approach toward orphan care. Some have begun to question whether international adoption is ethical or even necessary given that most children here have at least one parent; others doubt whether international adoption is a sustainable model for the development of Haiti and its future generations. Haiti will never improve, the thinking goes, if you adopt every child out of it.

From reporting I did for *The New York Times*, it became clear that dire poverty motivates most of the parents who turn their children over to orphanages in Haiti, the hemisphere’s poorest country. Faced with paltry access to public education and unable to pay school fees costing hundreds of dollars, parents believe orphanages will at least give basic schooling and food to their children. But many orphanages are unauthorized, and the Haitian government has begun closing the most negligent and abusive orphanages and reuniting children with their families. It’s a slow and fitful process, as there are few accredited institutions that can take in children while government officials track down their families.

The issues surrounding Haitian adoptions faced widespread media scrutiny after the quake, when 10 missionaries from Idaho were jailed en route to the Dominican Republic for taking custody of 33 children they said they believed to be orphans. The group’s now-dismantled website said the children would live and be schooled in the Dominican Republic and be eligible for adoption to the United States. It was later determined that all of the children had one or more living parents.

Megan Boudreaux, a 26-year-old Louisiana native who founded a Christian school in Haiti in 2011, said the scandal made her question the merits of foreigners adopting children who have living parents. “I believe that if a child could be raised by their mom, then they should be raised by their mom or dad or family,” she said over the phone. “It awakened me even more to the entitlement that Americans have when they come here,” she added. “Instead of trying to pull out random kids and give them a better education, why not work here in the country and change the education here?”

The desire to help Haitian children in Haiti has led some orphan care proponents to support orphanages, at a time when Haiti’s government is trying to close as many as possible. Some American Christian organizations here argue that orphanages function as a safety net for those children whose families have been crippled by poverty. A number of them advocate redirecting aid dollars from American organizations toward orphanages run by Haitian churches, to keep children in a Haitian environment. Others have forgone funding institutions altogether in favor of providing financial assistance to families to keep children in their fold.

Brad Johnson, president of the Florida-based Mission of Hope Haiti, has run a school outside Port-au-Prince since 1998. After coming across many families who, even when given scholarships, could not afford to keep their children, he built an orphanage in 2002. He has adopted two Haitian children, but never considered applying for the accreditation to process adoptions. “We feel that God brought us here to see this nation transformed and become what God created it to be,” he said in his office at the school.

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Jean-Marc Duvarier, 16, is typical of the children at Johnson’s orphanage. Six years ago, his out-of-work grandmother brought him here after his mother died from what the orphanage’s workers believe was AIDS (he had little contact with his father). Dressed in a light green uniform, Duvarier stood outside the dormitory where he lives with 16 boys.

“You never find the love that a mother gives,” he said in perfect English, describing the orphanage and the two caretakers he calls “daddies.” “But they give another kind of love.”

Until Haiti’s economy improves, Johnson said, orphanages must exist to care for those children whose families have no means to support them. “Either we take on the burden of caring for those children or we leave that burden upon that child to survive,” he said. “And we feel our responsibility, as Christians, is to take that burden on and ask other people who have the means to help us.”

Joe Knittig, the CEO of the Missouri-based Global Orphan Project, agrees that orphanages are necessary to care for “the kids of last resort,” as he calls them. But he thinks Haitian churches, and not American-run organizations, ought to manage that care. The Global Orphan Project establishes partnerships in which American churches fund Haitian congregations engaged in orphan care. Over bottles of Coke at a hotel restaurant in Port-au-Prince, Knittig recalled the incident involving the Idaho missionaries, saying his organization’s structure is a counterpoint to their “takeover model.” As he put it me, “We walk alongside the Haitian church.” It was an expression I heard several times before from evangelical Christian organizations describing their work, signaling an attempt to keep children within their culture and community. But such a relationship also opens up problems when the Haitian church doesn’t follow the letter of the law.

Since 2010 the Global Orphan Project has given Mission Une Seule Famille an Jesus Christ, the orphanage where Savini volunteers, $1970 per month to help house, feed, school, and care for 45 children, as well as thousands of dollars to repair its quake-damaged buildings. Although the orphanage was founded in 2005, its Haitian director, the Rev. Joseph Kesnel, said he picked up an application for governmental accreditation just three months ago. “It's disgusting,” Kesnel said of the required authorization fee costing the equivalent of about $356. Though he did not specify an amount, he said a portion of his earnings supplements the orphanage's operating costs. “Those little ones I’m helping, the government owes me to come and see the situation, know what their needs are and how they can help. Instead they’re asking from me?”

As I described in The New York Times, inspectors had not yet visited the orphanage, but there were troubling signs of neglect: children said lunch was usually their last meal and they were hungry by night; two caretakers in a room of a dozen girls knew only two of the girls’ first names; the coed dormitory smelled faintly of urine because no doors closed off the toilets and showers; a baby sat unattended, without a diaper, in the dirt courtyard.

Arielle Jeanty Villedrouin, who took charge of Haiti’s child welfare services in 2011, said it’s important for foreign donors to make sure orphanages are registered with the government so regular inspections can be done. “We’re not saying these international organizations should stop supporting centers in Haiti. We encourage that,” she said. “But they must show respect to the laws in Haiti so we can protect those children and ensure that they’re not trafficking.” In October of 2011, Haitian officials closed the orphanage Son of God after its owner was arrested on suspicions of child trafficking based on allegations presented by American missionaries; by the time of its closure, it had received funding from several international organizations, including Catholic Relief Services, Adventures in Missions in Georgia, and Timberline Church in Colorado.

Two weeks after the quake, Scott Vair, president of World Orphans, arrived in Port-au-Prince and quickly realized that the solution to the overcrowding of orphanages was not to build more orphanages. All of the Haitian churches he visited knew congregants who had taken in children who had lost their parents or were separated from them. Using a model it developed in Kenya, World Orphans, which is based in Colorado, started partnerships between American and Haitian churches. Instead of funding orphanages, the American counterparts give $900 per month to Haitian churches to be divvied up among 20 families to cover the costs of their children’s schooling, lunches, and medical care. Eliminating the need to raise tens of thousands of dollars to build and staff orphanages, said Vair, has kept the program cost-effective. But the partnerships have not
been able to avoid the problems of sustainability, he admits, that all organizations dependent on donations face.

Nearly three years in, six of the 320 children supported by World Orphans, have graduated to costlier secondary schools, which demand fees more than twice as large as the current education subsidy provided by the American churches. Some children, like Rosalene Desrosier, 16, whose mother cannot make up the difference with the income she earns from selling bags of coffee on the street, have forgone enrolling in school this year. “Nothing,” is what Rosalene said she does all day in the two-room cinder block house she shares with eight relatives, including her two nieces whose parents died in the earthquake and who are also in World Orphans’ program. Vair said World Orphans is exploring ways to provide microfinance loans to help caretakers like Rosalene’s mother generate income, hoping it will offset the mounting costs of education as well as food.

No matter the outcome, Vair emphasized, at least the child has remained in her family. Ultimately, he said, Rosalene’s mother “is the one responsible for that child’s care.” He added, “What we're trying not to do is take that responsibility away.”

Emily Brennan is a news assistant for The New York Times, where she also writes and blogs on travel, culture, and religion. She reported this article with the help of a grant from the International Reporting Project. André Paultre contributed reporting.