



Toward the Peaceful One

HealthEd Connect Volunteers Choose a Path Less Taken



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Life is full of crossroads and decisions. Some choices we make are of little consequence while others affect generations. On a warm afternoon I eagerly accepted the invitation of Ireen, Beauty, and Monica to accompany them with several of my colleagues on a home visit in Kasompe, Zambia.

Ireen and her friends are HealthEd Connect volunteers called kafwa. Our hosts led us along a rutted road that rarely saw a car, and eventually we turned off the lane and headed

down dusty paths where we jumped across hand-dug irrigation ditches, skirted struggling little gardens, and passed dozens of humble little mud-brick homes. Ireen's group had made this trek countless times in the past 12 years.

When we arrived 30 minutes later at the little home we were to visit, we were shyly greeted at the door by twins Sara and Mercy who stole furtive glances at us as they led the way into a room lit only by filtered light from an open-air window. After our eyes adjusted to the dark, we saw their father, Alex, who sat in a well-used overstuffed chair, one of the few pieces of furniture in the house.

The father welcomed us in a soft voice and apologized



for not having enough seats to accommodate everyone. Throughout our visit, the girls directed brief smiles at the kafwa, suggesting they shared a bond. Unable to speak Chi Bemba, their language, we communicated through smiles while the kafwa greeted each of the girls and their father warmly as they introduced us. When the visit was over, Ireen fell into step with me as we retraced our steps and she explained why the kafwa were regular visitors to this home.

The twins are something of a miracle in the community and survived only because of a team effort. Tragically, Sara and Mercy's mother died when they were 3 months old. When the kafwa visited the babies soon after their mother's passing, the volunteers found a grieving father caring for nine young children — including the infant twins — with no running water, refrigerator, or clothes washer. Think about that. Carrying water from a common pump for all the family's needs. Washing diapers by hand in a pail. Getting up in the middle of the night to comfort and feed two hungry babies. Lighting a candle or kerosene lamp to navigate the night.

When the twins were infants, their father had appreciatively but firmly refused an offer from the kafwa to take the twins to the health volunteers' own homes to care for them, Ireen said. Alex said he wanted to keep his family together and would somehow manage to care for the babies himself. Respecting his wishes, the kafwa decided they could be most helpful by routinely visiting and assisting the family. Baby blankets and simple clothes were provided; formula was made from cornmeal and spoon-fed to the babies. Without committed help it is unlikely the babies would have survived.

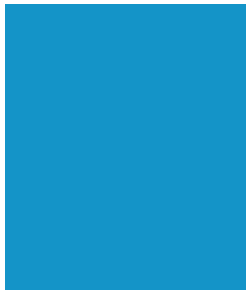
When Sara and Mercy reached school age, the kafwa made sure they were enrolled in the Kasombe Community School of Peace where they are assured of a daily bowl of hot porridge and a quality education. For many children school lunch is the only food they receive in a day.

Each December, to celebrate the end of the school year, the kafwa go all out to provide a meal for the more than 400 children enrolled in the school. Recently, in addition to a large bottle of the soft drink Fanta that brought gleeful smiles to every child's face, the kafwa served fried chicken. That required dressing 60 chickens the night before and then lighting charcoal at 5:30 a.m. to begin cooking.

What a labor of love! Chicken is expensive in Zambia and is a coveted treat afforded by many families only once every three or four months, or maybe just at Christmas.

Life hasn't been easy for the twins but their lives have definitely been uplifted through the help of the kafwa.





What would have happened to the twins if the volunteers had chosen a more conventional well-traveled comfortable career path rather than the one that led to decades of commitment and hard work?

The amazing story about the kafwa and their commitment doesn't end with Sara and Mercy. In the compound where the twins live, there are 13 kafwa like Ireen, Beauty, and Monica. At the time of our visit, the 13 kafwa had a total caseload of 34 clients.

Needs of the clients vary. For some palliative care is provided as their struggle with AIDS ends. Others need assistance to get to the clinic to receive medicine for malaria or tuberculosis. For still others leg ulcers, caused by diabetes and malnutrition, are slowly but successfully treated with an effective homemade guava leaf antiseptic. Regardless of the specific problem, a universal need of the clients is to receive validation of their worth. Many visits end with a prayer softly offered by the kafwa.

In addition to the kafwa in Kasombe, there are 140 HealthEd Connect volunteers in Zambia as well as in Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Malawi.

Volunteer organizations in each country choose their names: In Nepal they refer to themselves as *soyamsebika* (volunteers), in the Democratic Republic of Congo as *wasaidizi* (helpers), and in Malawi as *sinkhani* (prevention). Kafwa means helpers. Many have volunteered for over 30 years.

Each group has responded to the most pressing needs in their own country. In the Democratic Republic of Congo they chose to be trained as traditional birth attendants to help reduce the staggering maternal death rate; in Malawi the emphasis was on the weighing and monitoring of children younger than 5 where as many as 47 percent suffer from stunting; in Nepal the volunteers brought aid to victims of the 2015 earthquake and 2017 flood while pursuing long-term programs such as latrines to address poor sanitation and vented stoves to alleviate smoke inhalation.

In 2020 the health workers, regardless of country, were unified and focused on the same crisis: programs to prevent COVID-19. When funds were received, the health workers sprang into action holding hand-washing demonstrations, providing prevention information, and becoming the trusted source of current knowledge in their areas.

Sewing machines, which had originally been provided for income-generating projects, were pressed into service to make masks. Spigot buckets were purchased to provide hand-washing stations. Soap was provided for people who rarely enjoyed that luxury.

When asked why they chose to spend their lives as helpers, HealthEd Connect volunteers respond, "I have compassion for others," or "I can't rest when I know there are needs."



What path should we take in life? The one that carries us along with the flow of humanity seeking self-fulfillment? Or should we be looking for paths less traveled where people cry out for help? Is it possible to do both simultaneously? We're reminded in Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a:

God, the Eternal Creator, weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering. Such conditions are not God's will. Open your ears to hear the pleading of mothers and fathers in all nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children. Do not turn away from them. For in their welfare resides your welfare.

If we are truly serious about moving toward Jesus the peaceful One, we must act. We must *move*. I've always thought Africans nailed it in their proverb: When you pray, get your feet moving. However, we must choose where our feet will take us.

Jesus gave us the needed map to follow: Not a subtle hint, not a vague suggestion. But rather an obvious and modeled way of life. He spent his short life ministering to those in need of body, mind, or spirit healing. He healed the untouchable woman. He brought sight to the blind, comfort to widows, and a new way of life to the world. He was the quintessential health worker.

The kafwa in Zambia follow Jesus' example. They realized education was the only way to break the cycle of poverty in their villages. Many of the kafwa themselves are not literate.

Girls who receive an education through at least seventh grade build healthier, more stable lives for themselves and their children, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund has found.

Kafwa in Zambia identified education as the priority in their communities despite food scarcity that sometimes means children don't eat for an entire day or longer. It was the urging of the kafwa that ultimately encouraged HealthEd Connect to support the establishment in 2009 of kindergarten-seventh schools in the Copperbelt of Zambia. Today, three state-of-the-art campuses have libraries, small computer labs, cook shacks, and tire gardens. Trained teachers provide quality education to more than 1,400 children.

Thanks to the kafwa, who have a dedicated facility of their own at each school, robust programs have been added that include hot lunches, grief support for orphans, girls' achievement to teach self-care and encourage girls to stay




in school, scholarships for the most needy and gifted children to go to secondary school, clubs that provide volleyball and football (soccer), and vocational programs that teach woodworking, culinary skills, gardening, and sewing.

Three years ago, a personal development program was added for the kafwa. Having spent years serving others without expectation of return, the opportunity for personal development was exhilarating. To date, dozens of women have enrolled in group tutoring courses to learn basic literacy or English; three women have achieved a high school equivalency diploma, one took a culinary course and used the knowledge to teach her colleagues, two enrolled in sewing courses and put the skills to immediate use sewing masks during the pandemic, and one has enrolled in a nursing program.

We each choose the path we will travel. As Apostle Ron Harmon said in a recent *Daily Bread* article:

“We trust not in the birth [of Jesus] alone but what is being born in each of us this day and every day. We trust in the vision of a new community where each precious life will be held in loving care.”

That vision beckons us down the less-traveled path that leads to Jesus the peaceful One and toward a worldwide community of peace. 

More About HealthEd Connect

HealthEd Connect has a 15-member board of directors. It was co-founded by Jac and Sherri Kirkpatrick in 2009 and currently operates in four countries: Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nepal.

The 501(c)3 charity was built on relationships formed by Jac when he traveled as a Community of Christ apostle in Africa and Asia, and by Sherri when was dean of nursing at Graceland University. Even though not formally affiliated with the Community of Christ, the three community schools for that HealthEd Connect built and supports in Zambia are on church property. Program services are provided by people from a variety of faith backgrounds and are open to anyone in need.

HealthEd Connect is a peace partner in Community of Christ Peace Pathways, has an ongoing cooperative relationship with Graceland University, and has headquarters on the Graceland University Independence Campus. Go to www.healthedconnect.org for more information.

Casey Main '22 is a fourth-generation Graceland student. Many of her family members are proud alumni and their shared legacy continues.



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