

“MR SLIM” – AIDS IN KITUI, KENYA  
*Excerpts from a 2005 Kenyan Mission Journey*  
By Kathryn Runman-Zimney

Under the shade trees near the Mutomo Hospital, the Kenyan people were waiting patiently for the “visitors” from Minnesota. They’d been waiting for quite some time, but judging by the exuberant welcome we received, alive with song and dance and joyful hoots, it didn’t appear that the wait bothered them much. We were learning that the Kenyan people indeed are blessed with an abundant gift of patience.

We had arrived at the AIDS Home Health and Outreach Program and the group waiting to meet us was comprised of AIDS orphans, their guardians (grandmothers mostly) and members of an AIDS support group. Sr. Therese Mwingi, Matron of the hospital, and Mary Robert, R.N., the nurse who oversees the AIDS Outreach Program, greeted us and briefly described the process and outreach used for the care of their AIDS victims. We were then blessed to have an opportunity to interact with the people who were waiting – an encounter which would prove to be one of the most moving experiences of my life.

Nurse Mary walked me over to the shade trees where the orphans, ages ranging from 4 – 16, were sitting on benches facing one another. Some were looking down and others looked away from me, but the haunting looks in the eyes and faces of those who looked directly at me told me that these children were fragile and hurting and had experienced way too much heartache in their young lives. Trying to stay composed as I sat down among them, my sense of empathy was growing stronger by the minute. The children moved nervously and I wanted to put them at ease. I spoke to them about the losses in my own life and by sharing my story with them I prayed it might help them be comfortable with me. We talked about how our faith plays such an important role in our lives particularly in times of despair. The feeling of solidarity was apparent and slowly, one by one, the children began to share their own heartache with me, and our tears were mingled together in the painful sharing.

“My name is Agnes, I am 7 years old. My mother and my father died. I now live with my grandmother who cares for me and my younger brother and sister.” Each child spoke their name, their age and the dates when they lost their mothers and fathers and other family members. Each story was more painful than the next.

Young Sarah said, “First my mother died and then a year later my father died. Then I lived with my uncle, until he tried to kill me.” Sarah showed me the scars on her neck where a machete almost took her life. “Now, I have a guardian who I live with and who looks after me and cares about me,” she said as tears ran down her cheeks.

Then a little boy stood up and walked toward me with a paper in his hands. “My name is Adam,” he said, “and I wrote a poem for you today.” Adam is 10 years old and in fifth grade. The following is his poem which he read out loud to me:

## AIDS

AIDS oh AIDS,  
You're a deadly monster.  
You have taken our fathers and mothers.  
Homes are full of graves,  
Children are orphans,  
Women are widows,  
Men are widowers.  
Why?  
Just because of "Mr. Slim"?  
Scientists have gone to the moon,  
Made nuclear weapons,  
Yet your cure has defeated them.  
AIDS, do you have no mercy?

Written and Presented by Adam Ndinda, Class 5

Clearly this AIDS poem speaks of the immense grief the children are struggling with and it asks questions where there are no answers. An early sign of AIDS is weight loss, and "Mr. Slim" is their slang term for this dreaded disease. I wiped the tears from my eyes and shared with the children that we grieve with each one of them and spoke of how we came to Kenya out of a sense of solidarity. We promised a partnership of love and prayer through our connection as brothers and sisters in Christ.

AIDS victims were busily making jewelry to sell for income near the "Grandmother" guardians. These beautiful elderly women shared their struggles of raising orphans with barely enough food to keep them alive. We heard the same mantra from then over and over again; "Please help us, we have no food for our children." These words tugged at our hearts as we hugged one other and cried together some more.

As our visit was coming to an end, we were each presented with an ebony cross necklace which was hand made by the AIDS support group. The same young man who wrote the poem presented his cross saying, "My name is Adam Ndinda. I am 10 years old and I am an orphan. My mother has died from AIDS. My father has died from AIDS. I ask when you wear this cross, will you please remember my people and pray for our country." How can we ever forget? We have family in Kitui now and they have carved a place in our hearts. We were overwhelmed with their hospitality and generosity, their care for one another and their joyous praise of a God who sustains us all. Our thoughts and prayers are with our Kenyan friends forever.

