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## **World AIDS Day Dec. 1**

### **Chatham Church Adopts African AIDS Orphans**

**by Tim Wood**

CHATHAM --- According to the United Nations, there are currently nearly 40 million people living with HIV. Almost all of them --- 95 percent --- are in developing nations.

Nowhere is that as evident as in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the UN estimates some 24.5 million people live with HIV. The agency predicted that 2.7 million more people would become infected with the virus that causes AIDS last year. Some 12 million children have become orphans because of the epidemic.

Friday, Dec. 1, is World AIDS Day. Locally, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church will mark the day by launching its AIDS in Africa Action Fund, the latest effort in a long-term, multi-pronged effort to make a difference in the lives of the people in one parish in Kenya.

In the past year, the church has raised more than \$24,000 to help feed children orphaned by AIDS in Maseno North, Kenya. Funneled through the Eastern Massachusetts Episcopal Dioceses and the Anglican Church, the money has gone to support the once-a-week feeding program for 400 children in Khwiliba Parish, as well as the purchase of bedmats, mosquito netting and uniforms to allow children to attend school, and to support a comprehensive mobile health care clinic.

The project began last winter when Rev. A. Homer McCue, a Chatham resident and retired Episcopal priest, led a Lenten program on AIDS in Africa at the church. About 25 people attended, and at the end of the session, "We decided we didn't want to be just a study committee," said Jane Harris. "We decided to be an action committee."

Led by Harris, Carol Rader and Lew Kimball, the committee held a series of meetings (including one with Harris' son, an AP correspondent in Africa) as well as sponsoring an African-themed service featuring African drumming.

"It energized our church, and we took up donations," Harris said.

The committee took the lead of the dioceses, which pledged .7 percent of its operating budget for AIDS relief through its Jubilee Committee, of which McCue is a member. The United Nations estimates that if every nation contributed .7 percent of its

operating budget, hunger and poverty --- chief underlying causes of AIDS --- could be eradicated. The committee decided to raise .7 percent of St. Christopher's operating budget, about \$3,000, to help fund the Jubilee Committee's work, but later opted to raise a higher amount to help fund the weekly feeding program, sponsored by the Mothers Union in Khwiliba Parish.

Every Saturday, orphans from the surrounding villages of Maseno North gather for a meal of beans, rice and maize. There, the children also receive AIDS prevention information and, once a month, health care services from the mobile clinic operated by Dr. Gerry Hardison, a retired San Diego doctor who set up a hospital in Maseno.

Hardison and his wife, Nan, visited St. Christopher's earlier this year, giving the parish an AIDS in Africa flag which will be flown on World AIDS Day.

Going beyond just the feeding program, St. Christopher's continued to raise money, purchasing bedmatting and mosquito netting to protect against malaria, and sending funds to the Mother's Union, which makes school uniforms for kids.

"Children have free education in Kenya through the eighth grade," Harris said. "If they have uniforms. We thought that was a no-brainer."

The program serves several purposes, she said. It raises awareness of AIDS among church members and the community; raises money for resources to fight the epidemic; and establishes a two-way relationship between St. Christopher's and Khwiliba Parish.

At first, many in the church thought AIDS was too big an issue to handle, said Harris.

"But we're helping between 250 and 400 orphans," she said. "We're part of the solution. It doesn't take much." She hopes that other churches and residents will realize that they, too, can help. "Money goes a long way over there," she pointed out. St. Christopher's model has already proved an inspiration for several other Episcopal churches, McCue said.

"One of our objectives in this undertaking is to act as a catalyst among other churches on the Cape, to encourage other parishes to join in the support of this and other programs that are working to bring health and hope to some of Africa's neediest children," said Kimball. "While AIDS is the focus of our efforts, malaria, juvenile diarrhea and malnutrition take just as many lives. There's much to be done, and we are pleased to note that several other parishes are supporting similar programs."

The program depends on the Anglican Church's network in Kenya. Putting aside the differences between the American Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church, the organizations work together "below the radar of national politics," said McCue. Because

the Anglican Church has an organization already in place in Africa, there are no administration costs.

“We know that every dollar that goes through this program provides services,” he said.

The committee has recently started another program to send books to the parish. Parishioners are being asked to donate used picture books for kids, which can be sent for \$1 per pound.

Beginning Friday, the committee will seek donations to its AIDS in Africa Action Fund from both parishioners and community members. Any amount will be accepted; even kids who give change from their piggy banks will receive cards acknowledging their donation, said Harris. The church will also fly the AIDS in Africa banner donated by the Hardisons. Donation cards will also be available at the church’s Christmas fair Dec. 9.

The AIDS epidemic is still outpacing the response, McCue said, “but we are making progress. Deaths of children under 5 are down by 30 percent. Supporting the feeding and health care programs help in this effort.

“A large number of Chatham residents have responded generously to the need,” said Kimball. “It is heartbreaking to see pictures of 13- and 14-year-old children who are head of their households because AIDS has taken both parents and there are no other relatives. Spreading the word in this community is important to enlist further support.”

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