

# ACTS OF FAITH

## Why good works matter

SOUTH AFRICA has an estimated 6.5 million people suffering with HIV/AIDS. That is more than any other nation on earth, though South Africa's total population is only 43 million, less than the population of California and Illinois combined. There are already more than 1.5 million orphans in South Africa, more than the population of Idaho, as a result of the AIDS pandemic, and that number is expected to grow to 5 million by 2010. After generations of racial oppression, bolstered by a theological framework that helped establish white supremacy, there is a staggering 47 percent unemployment throughout the nation. That number soars to nearly 80 percent in the urban slum where we are working outside of Cape Town.

In February 2003, my family and I left our home and our church in Santa Barbara, California, to work on AIDS prevention and community development in South Africa. In partnership with our church in California and Christians in the township of Philippi, we founded an organization called Bridges of Hope. It is our hope to build bridges into the lives of those who are suffering in order to create long-term, self-sustaining solutions. We do this primarily by equipping churches to minister holistically (spiritually, physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially) to their communities.

Serving among those who are suffering in South Africa has transformed my understanding of prayer, discipleship,

stewardship, compassion, and blessing, but especially of faith and works.

When I was a pastor in the U.S., I often struggled to reconcile my Reformed roots—a gospel of faith alone—with passages such as Matthew 25 where Jesus boldly declares that if we don't feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give a cup of cold water to the thirsty, and visit prisoners, we will be commanded to depart from his presence on Judgment Day.

When I studied the book of James, at times I resonated with Luther's opinion that it was a "might strawy epistle" and maybe it shouldn't have been allowed in the canon. Consider these words from God written by James: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

"But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

"You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the

altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. You see that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.

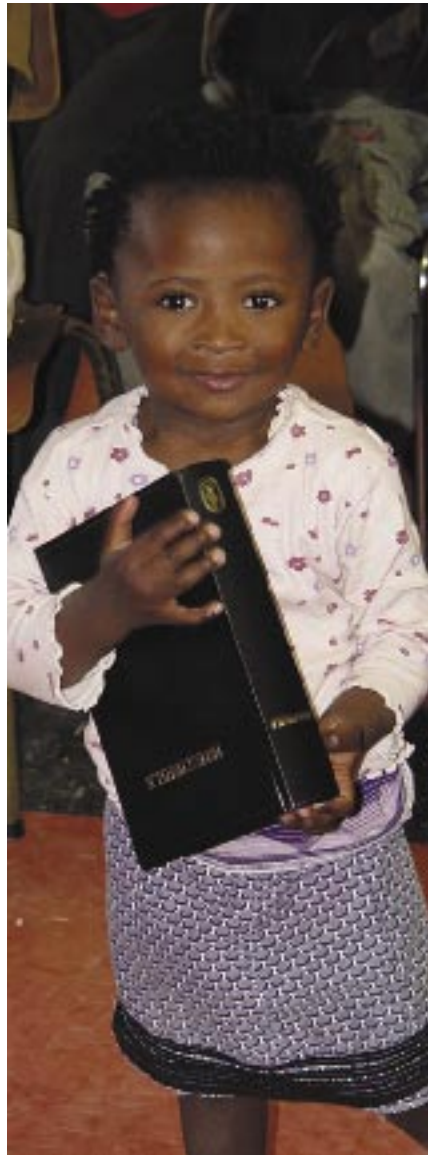
"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:14-26, TNIV).

One day, two of our community health workers heard about a young, widowed woman who was very sick with AIDS and had barricaded herself into the shack she called home. Her neighbors had noticed her two young sons coming and going from the house and occasionally begging for food. When our health workers visited, they found a frail, desperately ill woman sitting on a tattered sofa, the only piece of furniture in her shack made of wood and tin scraps, holding a two-week-old baby. The woman was taken to a local clinic where she died hours later, leaving behind three orphaned children.

Events such as this have deeply affected my understanding of God. Stories such as this play themselves out around the world over and over again every day: suffering people face insurmountable challenges and are desperately in need of practical care.



Vuyaseka (pictured at right) was two weeks old when her mother died of AIDS. She and her brother Odwa (above) now live at the Bridges of Hope orphan home.



Brother and sister Bulelwa and Sinxolo are part of the Bridges of Hope orphan support group.

The reality that I could have been born in a shack in the Philippi Township of Cape Town has become a part of the fabric of my soul. I didn't choose to be born into a wealthy suburban family in America. I didn't have anything to do with it; thus, God must have known that I was destined for the life I had. At times I have felt twinges of guilt for all the blessings I received as an American. Now I have discovered that with blessing comes responsibility.

Faith demands that I respond to the brokenness in the world with righteous deeds. These deeds have nothing to do with my salvation, but rather the actions that I participate in are the natural response of my faith to God's prompting. These actions don't save me, but if I am a believer, good deeds will accompany my faith—no, they become the biblical response of my faith in the situation at hand.

Things such as these—which were topics for theological ping-pong in the past—have become the reality of my daily journey. The woman with three children died during our first year living in South Africa. But two years later, all three children are thriving. They are healthy, happy, and fully loved by a woman who is raising seven orphans in a home sponsored by Bridges of Hope. We praise God for the faith of many around the world who have prayed for these children, supported their needs, and allowed their faith to respond in good works.

Good works, done by faithful Chris-

tians, can mean the difference between life and death for the orphans that we meet every day here in Philippi. Orphans like Nomafili (fifteen), Thandiswa (thirteen), and Onele (eight). They lost both of their parents to HIV/AIDS and are now raising themselves in a crime-ridden neighborhood where they often hear gunshots as they lay in bed at night. They struggle to understand why God would allow both of their parents to die, but they have an unimaginable amount of hope in the midst of their tragic circumstances. The response of caring believers displaying their faith in action has brought these girls hope. After receiving care from concerned Christians here in Philippi, these children experienced and then embraced the compelling love of Jesus at the orphan support group that we lead in their neighborhood.

Believers in America and South Africa are providing for their school fees, clothes, food, and utilities. These three children have found strength through the faith of others; strength that has caused them to begin dreaming of finishing school and becoming leaders in their country. This hope has challenged my faith to grow. The cycle completes itself: faith moves into action as works of service, works spark hope in the lives of those who are suffering, and hope in the midst of suffering builds the faith of those who are ministering. The great news of Jesus's love is recognized as love demonstrates the heart of God in practical ways.

Those who have been blessed with abundance are like puzzle pieces formed for a perfect fit with those who have great need in their lives. In the process, God makes himself known and both pieces find their purpose being lived out in the process of transformation. I count it an honor to serve as a bridge between those in need and those who were created to meet those needs.

Please pray with us that the millions of people suffering here and the millions of people called out by God to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus to them would be connected. □

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