



Why I Said Yes to Congo

When **Denee Anderson** signed up to sponsor a young child through Covenant Kids Congo, she could not imagine how it would change her life.

When I first heard about Covenant Kids Congo, the partnership between World Vision and the Covenant, about a year and a half ago, I was thrilled. I knew the Covenant had been doing incredible work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for more than seventy-five years. I also knew that World Vision had the expertise and desire to aid children. At the time, our church, Naperville (Illinois) Covenant, was doing a study of *The Hole in Our Gospel*, by Richard Stearns, president of World Vision. During this season God was revealing his heart for justice to me and

softening my own heart to see and respond to the desperate needs in our world. As the mother of three young children, I felt especially drawn to this new project.

So I volunteered to gather a team from my church to decide how we would present this opportunity to our congregation. Forty dollars a month would support a specific child in Gemena, but the funds would contribute to the needs of the community. Children, their families, and the greater community would benefit from clean water, education, health-care, food resources, and economic development.

As we planned, the word that kept coming up for me was “celebration.” We scheduled a Hope Sunday on October 14, 2012, at church to present the great need in Congo and to provide an invitation for individu-



invest myself in Espe. As I watched my children leave for school in the morning, I prayed that Espe would be able to do the same that day. As I fed my family, I prayed that Espe would have the nourishment and strength to learn and grow. When my kids laughed and played with their unending amount of toys, I prayed that Espe would be able to find joy in something special that day. And when my children sang songs or read from the Bible, I prayed that someone near Espe would share God's goodness with him too. In short, I committed to encouraging, loving, and praying him through his childhood.

Two months after our Hope Sunday, the idea of a vision trip through Covenant World Mission popped up. Our church had the opportunity to send a group to Congo to visit Covenant mission sites and experience firsthand what God is doing there.

the world that is unstable and dangerous. That sounded crazy!

But I kept hearing those quiet whispers that I couldn't ignore. By February, I was officially signed up to go. The team consisted of three other people from my church, one of whom was my mother-in-law. Two World Mission staff and another Covenanter from Texas also joined us.

To raise money for the trip we hosted a lunch in May. We are blessed to have three families in our church who are from different parts of Africa, and they volunteered to make an authentic African lunch. And I mean authentic! It was beautiful—we had African décor and music. They even set up a play area for the kids to demonstrate how mosquito nets work and how kids mash the corn and cook it over a pretend fire. People came, enjoyed lunch, listened to us share

als and families to sponsor children. I wanted our Hope Sunday to be a celebration of this new connection to Congo. I wanted it to celebrate the hope that we have for this place and these specific children. Our team brought fabrics, props, and images that reflected the beauty of the continent of Africa and the people who live there into the midst of our sanctuary. And what a celebration it was! In a matter of minutes, our congregation of 200 had committed to sponsor seventy children.

As I held my own sponsorship card with the photo of a four-year-old boy named Espe, I realized my heart was connecting in a way I had not anticipated. And so I began to



Denee Anderson shows Espe pictures from her home in Illinois.

I tried my best to avoid the informational meetings. Although the idea sounded exciting, my mind immediately went to logistics. As a stay-at-home mom, I couldn't even consider being away for twelve days. I knew it would nearly be impossible to leave my eight-, five-, and two-year-old and travel to a country halfway around

why we were going, and donated to the trip. I was overwhelmed by the support of our church family.

Although I felt confident that God was calling me to go to Congo, there were many moments when I was just plain scared. We heard constant

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news reports of instability across the nation. We learned that it was too dangerous to fly commercial airlines because of recent crashes, so we would be taking a four-hour flight to Gemena in a fifteen-passenger plane. After six immunizations I wondered if I was taking too big a health risk. At times the fear was overwhelming. My family was equally concerned—worried that I would be in physical danger.

My mom offered to take care of my kids while I was gone, so my husband, Kurt, could work. The decision was very difficult for both of us, but Kurt said to me, “I’m not going to get in the way—this is between you and God.” In the end, I said yes to the trip because I sensed God inviting me to catch a vision for what he was doing.

We flew into Kinshasa and traveled to Karawa, where the Covenant has based its ministry from the beginning, and then on to Gemena. There we saw the beginning of the water project that will provide a clean water source to a city that has none. We also toured the community garden projects. Most of the families that work these gardens are families of sponsored children. World Vision teaches them farming practices, such as proper drainage and crop rotation, and the families are able to earn a consistent income from the food they grow and sell.

Our interactions with the World Vision staff left me feeling overjoyed, seeing this group of people who are truly being the hands and feet of Jesus. I watched them interact with people in the community with tender-

ness and joy. The staff must have incredible strength to face the mountain of obstacles they encounter daily.

I felt pure excitement when I saw the difference that child sponsorship was making in this community.

The money that we send each month is changing the course of a child’s life, whether that means access to life-saving medication, an opportunity to go to school, a job for a parent in a community garden, or the simple fact that local community volunteers for World Vision help track all the children in the program.

The best part of the trip for me was meeting Espe and his mother, who is a young mom like me. We looked at pictures I had brought from my home, and she shared pictures of her family with me. Through our translator she told me how grateful she was for Espe’s education.

When Espe approached, I could already see a difference from his original picture on my sponsorship packet. He looked healthy, had glowing skin, and he smiled! I was the first white person he had ever seen. After he got over his shock, he even sang me a song about how thankful he was for his education. As tears rolled down my face I thanked God for the opportunity to connect with him and for the way this four-year-old boy was opening my eyes in new ways.

The trip changed me. That heart connection that began through hosting a sponsorship event deepened as I developed a better understanding of life in Congo and met my sponsored child. I’m back home now and have returned to my life as a wife and mother, but I am not the same person I was before I left. If it had not been for sponsorship, Congo would have remained just another distant place for me.

Now that I am home I talk about World Vision’s work all the time, encouraging people to try sponsorship. What I want most is for people to understand the power of this work. The partnership between the Covenant Church and World Vision is doing great things.

And we are committed to sponsoring Espe until he turns eighteen. I hope that our communication can become more frequent as he gets older. I see our commitment as beyond money—it is a commitment of prayer and encouragement, and I don’t think that will ever end.

This week I received an updated picture from Espe, and he wrote about how he would like to be a doctor. How exciting it will be to see what he becomes! For a child who was not attending school just over a year ago to be able to dream of a profession is evidence of the deep hope we have in God’s mission in Congo.

Most Covenant Kids Congo sponsors will not get to travel to Congo to meet their child. I definitely was not expecting to have that opportunity when I picked up Espe’s card! What I know is that far more important than physically meeting Espe is my growing desire to know and understand the hopes and dreams of a young child of God who lives a world away from me. ■

Through Covenant Kids Congo, more than 6,000 children have already been sponsored. Three water systems are being built to provide clean water, and three schools have been built to provide space for 1,500 children to learn in a safe and dry place, especially during the rainy season.

The goal is to reach 10,000 sponsorships, which means that 4,000 children are still waiting to be sponsored. To sponsor a child, or for more information go to covenantkidscongo.org, or call (224) 585-0625.