

Dear Everyone

I did not intend to stat another letter about our adventures with the street kids so soon after the last one, but events appear to be overtaking us more quickly than I can keep track of, and since we have a two day public holiday in Zambia this week, I felt I should make use of the time to get something on the record.

The trouble is knowing where to start.

Last time I told you we had decided that something must be done about the increasing number of little boys we have seen abandoned at Manda Hill. Our earlier experience of street kids in this area was that they were older boys, whom nobody wanted or trusted, and who had been on the streets for a number of years.

Consequently they were pretty hardened characters usually with a heavy drug addiction, and by definition they were survivors, having made it to their late teens. These were the boys we took in, and about whom I have written over the past 3 years. In total we have probably looked after 30, with a drop out rate of 5 or 6, meaning that 24 are still going straight, either with us or on their own. By and large we have been encouraged and humbled by the progress they have made and how well they have adapted to a new life, and as we look at them now we can see that many of them will make kind and responsible husbands and fathers thereby securing the happiness of their wives and children also. Mission accomplished you might say, and certainly we thought so.

But over the past 12 months we have seen a disturbing new development in the street kid population around Manda Hill. For those who do not know, Manda Hill is a western style shopping mall near to the area we live in. It is the biggest shopping place in Zambia, and is frequented by well-to-do local people and the expatriate community. This makes it a good place to beg, and although the boys are not allowed inside the premises they hang around at the traffic lights outside and ask for food and money from the shoppers. When we arrived in Zambia 5 years ago, the lads at Manda Hill were the older boys I have been talking about. As we got to know them we were able to take good number of them in, and at one point the problem had reduced in the area except for a few hard cases who simply refused to leave the street. Of course there are thousands of other street children in Zambia – an estimated 100,000 – and many of them live in Lusaka and beg in other parts of the city. One such area is a local market called Soweto, where an estimated 200 boys used to sleep every night. The marketers had historically tolerated their presence but decided some time last year that the boys were a nuisance and a risk to their business, so they cracked down on them and drove them out of the market. This left 200 boys, most of them very young, with no shelter and no begging pitch, so they scattered around town, and about 50 of them settled at Manda Hill, where there were few other boys to stake claim. And so, the problem multiplied before our eyes. The newcomers were very different from our existing group of lads. For a start they were much younger – some as young as 6, and they were therefore not so hardened to street life. Secondly, they were made up of all kinds of boys. The brutal fact is that the average life expectancy of a boy who goes on the street in Zambia is 6 years. Since the survivors make it to adulthood, this means that a lot of little boys, with gentler natures or less robust physiques, do not make it to their 6th year on the street. With the migration that took place, we were suddenly faced with little boys who were not just little, but were almost certainly NOT survivors. Added to this, the bigger boys who were around Manda Hill were quick to spot the opportunity to introduce the little guys to glue and solvent abuse, and then sell it to them to feed their habit, and so within a short space of time we found a whole new generation of little lost souls, stoned out of their heads, high on glue, dirty, smelly, cold and hungry, begging for enough money to survive through to the following day. For many of them “the sands of time are sinking” very fast, with little hope of “the dawn of heaven” breaking, and it was, and is, very distressing to watch. And on a weekly basis, Christine and I would say we must do something about the problem, we cannot just walk past again.

But we did not know what to do. The fact is that we do not have enough space on our premises to take many more children, and certainly not another 50. Yet if we leave them, many of them might die, and so the soul searching and hard questions rose again and again, with no apparent solution. Out of all this we came to a strong conviction on a couple of issues. First that we were willing to take up the challenge of taking on more children if the resources to do so became available, and second that the resources would become available if we were meant to do it. But none of this answered the immediate question “what can we do now?”. Our previous experience with the boys we currently support told us that the first step has to be to get to know the boys and let them begin to feel confident with us. To do this, we had to meet them on their terms, and in large numbers as they are automatically suspicious of any move which tends to separate them into individuals. So we agreed 4 weeks ago to invite them all for Sunday lunch. We expected about 20, but in the event 45 turned up, and the number has remained at that level for the 4 weeks we have been operating. That first Sunday was a life-altering experience for us all. There is so much I could tell you about, so many little glimpses of the horrors of life on the street, so many flashes of love winning over all the odds, so many illustrations of what God has done for us on a cosmic scale. But let me just give you a couple of incidents which show some of it. Like Clifford, a mentally retarded teenager, abandoned on the street, high on glue, with patches of pink skin all over his body, and hair turning prematurely grey. Unable to express himself clearly, he just put his head on my shoulder and grinned at me when I hugged him. Or Sam, 14 years old, pretending to box with me, then dropping his stance, running to me and holding me round the neck for dear life. He had to be prised off by a couple of helpers, but all he wanted was a cuddle. Or little Albert, 8 years old, shivering with cold, and hunger, yet leaving his place in the food queue to get a hug from

one of the helpers. Or Gift, 15, with dead hopelessness in his eyes, who told me how he had been to school until 2003 when his parents were killed in a road accident and he went from comfortable home to street in a matter of days. Or our own dear lads, giving up their afternoon, to sit amongst little groups of street kids and talk to them, counselling, showing kindness, affection and the love of Christ to children who are where they used to be. Or Nicholas, Sarah and Mulenga running themselves ragged fetching and carrying all afternoon and in the end crying over the misery they had seen. Or little Rachel and Memory taking some of the small boys by the hand and bringing them to play with their toys. And on every side the dirt of the street, lice (yes lice!), the smell of unwashed bodies and the overpowering fumes of glue and solvent, from the boys clothes and breath. I cannot convey properly what it was like, but I am in no doubt that love was shown and relationships forged that will stand the test of time. The subsequent 3 Sundays have followed a similar pattern, though of course with each passing week, we recognise more of the boys and they become more confident in relating to us. Group of helpers have appeared from nowhere, so that we are never left to manage the situation alone, and our faithful friend Phil Bailey has been a tower of strength throughout. This has all been happening while we considered a much longer term idea of trying to obtain a small farm on the outskirts of Lusaka and turning it into a small village type location for keeping many more children. We had been concerned that taking more kids would mean losing that one on one contact which is vital to them, but the last few weeks have showed us that many of the older lads are now fit and able to be responsible older brother figures to the younger boys and could in fact be trusted with a lot of the work in caring and nurturing them. A smallholding would be ideal for building housing, a small school, a workshop for trades education and an agriculture project, run by Phil which would serve the dual purpose of providing food and teaching good farming methods to the children. It all seemed like an impossible dream so we discussed it many times only to shelve it again. Yet now here we are faced with a crisis. We need more space if we are to do any more. We are willing to go forward, and the personnel seem to be available to make such a project work. And then.... Well I told you last time that we had been contacted by an estate agent who wanted to donate some cash for every sale they made, then said she had found a bigger place for us to move to. We really did not consider it seriously since the asking price was \$200,000. However, prompted by curiosity we went to look at it. It was exactly what we were looking for. A lovely house with enough bedrooms for our extended family and visitors, a double garage which would make a great dormitory for 20 little boys, with 2 small cottages for the bigger lads, its own water supply, and 5 acres of land to build on and farm. So now we had the need, the vision, the people to help, and the site. The question was; were we willing to take the next step? After much thought, Christine and I decided that we could probably afford to offer \$150,000 (£85,000) if we sold our house in Edinburgh and re-invested the proceeds. So we offered this amount, almost certain it would be rejected. But last Friday the offer was accepted since we were going to use the house to help street children. In between fits of excitement, we are panicking as we contemplate the undertaking, but it all seems to be coming together. Of course we worry about losing our base in Scotland, but faith reminds us we are in the hands of a Father who knows all we need, and our security does not rest in possessions such as houses or land.

Since we started feeding the street kids, we have got to know quite a few of them quite well. Over the last 4 weeks 2 of them have come to stay with us. One of them, Jonathan, was best friends with one of our lads, Danny, when they were on the street together. They used to sleep together and look out for one another. One day someone stole something from a shopkeeper who reported it to the police. The police descended on the area and arrested everyone in sight including Jonathan. Danny escaped and ran away, at which point he came to our house and stayed with us. Poor Jonathan says he was beaten unconscious by the police in the cells and when he was released without charge, found that his friend had disappeared. Then 2 weeks ago he was asked to come to our house for lunch and met Danny again. It was a tearful re-union all round, and Danny, who is very shy and quiet, begged that Jonathan be allowed to stay with him. How could we refuse? Then David our carpenter met a little boy John one Sunday and felt so moved at his plight he asked if he could "keep him". So John moved in, and sleeps with David and proudly helps him in the workshop. Culturally this is a very unusual thing for David to do as older boys would traditionally have very little to do with younger ones and certainly would not agree to share a room with them, but the relationship seems to be working on both sides.

And then last night happened. We were finishing supper when we got a message that 4 of the little boys were at the gate. One of them, called Wisdom, who looks about 9, had been assaulted while begging for money. Instead of just refusing to help or ignoring him, the driver of the car slapped him hard enough to knock him onto the railings by the roadside where he gashed his head and started bleeding profusely. Once all the chaos had settled, 3 of his friends remembered I had told them that they should come to us if they needed help, so they set off with him and arrived about 7 pm. We managed to get poor little Wisdom cleaned and patched up but felt he should stay the night in case he had any reaction to the head trauma. His friends immediately took this as a general invitation, and tried to get me to agree that they could stay "forever". I refused to be drawn, knowing full well that every day they stay is an unspoken promise, but told them they could stay the night, provided they bathed first. We should probably draw a discreet veil over the bathing episode – maybe I will relate it when we are all older and wiser – but suffice it to say I nearly collapsed laughing at their antics. Then they gobbled a huge meal of maize porridge and eggs and settled down in sleeping bags to watch Lord of the Rings. This morning new hope was dawning in their eyes and we realise we are not going to be able to send them away. Wisdom is very quiet and shy, but walks around the compound holding my hand, while the other 3 scallywags cannot believe their luck, and are generally

creating havoc. But they are in our hearts now, and the big boys are very happy to share with them. Some of them even said they would move out and rent a house together so the little ones could be looked after properly.

So there we have it. Everything is moving at breathtaking speed. The road seems to be going quickly in one direction, and we are happy to follow it. It could all yet go wrong, but somehow I don't think it will, and we are enjoying the anticipation of seeing how our God will supply all our needs.

Until next time, who knows where we will be by then,

God Bless

Don, Christine, Sarah, Rachel, Nicholas and Mulenga, and all the boys