COVER STORY: Stars from Bono to Rick Warren are throwing the spotlight on millions of HIV-related deaths. But the frontier is not onstage, it's in African villages where small groups are saving lives and finding enthusiastic support for their ministry evangelism

THE OTHER VENUE

First in a series by Marvin & Susan Olasky in Namibia, Zambia, and South Africa

HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS WATCHED ON TELEVISION the July 2 Live8 concerts. U2, Sting, Pink Floyd, REM, Elton John, Paul McCartney and others all sang their hearts out, as scheduled, for African debt relief (see WORLD, June 25). • Thousands of miles south, a smaller concert went unnoticed. In late June in the village of Loskop four hours east of Johannesburg, eight boys and girls ages 13 to 18, standing in a circle in a cold, dimly lit room, sang lines from a Ladysmith Black Mombazo song now popular across South Africa: "AIDS killed my father, AIDS killed my mother, AIDS is killing Africa." One singer ran his finger across his throat. Others stomped their feet on the cement floor. Then Rob Smith, the 47-year-old, wispy-bearded

"AIDS IS KILLING AFRICA": An HIV/AIDS Zambian woman comforts her 21-month-old son in Ngombe township in Lusaka, Zambia.

SALIM HENRY [REUTERS]

REACHING OUT: Zulu children (above) with Rob Smith at the Agathos project in Loskop. Right: children of farmers in the Zambian Sons of Thunder program.

head of the Agathos Foundation—*agathos* is Greek for "good"—told the eight about the "need to talk about sex. We need to talk about it openly so we can see what Jesus says about sex and about our bodies. Then we relate that to the AIDS crisis."

The crisis is real. Fewer than one out of a hundred U.S. adults is HIV-positive, but at least one out of five adults in South Africa is, and the macabre stat may soon be one out of two and heading even higher. Epidemics historically have tended to kill the very young and the very old, but AIDS is different: Those ages 20 to 40 are most affected, which means that so far more than 12 million African children have been orphaned because of AIDS.

Sometimes grandparents are able to care for those kids; sometimes 12-year-olds care for their younger siblings; sometimes no one cares. African orphans who survive are also hard hit in other ways. UNICEF reports that two-thirds of rural orphans and one-third of urban ones are not enrolled in school. The World Bank reports high levels of malnutrition, with half of South Africa's children stuck with stunted growth. Many children survive by working long hours, sometimes in prostitution.

But the 32 orphans on the dusty Agathos property in Loskop along the almost-dry Tugela River are doing well, and Mr. Smith last month was trying to teach them not to throw their lives away. Wearing a T-shirt showing a tree planted by streams of water, he read to them the Ten Commandments, emphasizing "Do not commit adultery" and "Do not steal," and told them of predictions that "90 percent of you will be dead by the age of 30."

Mr. Smith put his arm around one girl, said, "We're going to pretend that she's HIV-positive," and asked her to speak to three others. Giggling, she complied. Those three then spoke to the others. "That is how AIDS spreads," he said, and contrasted that multiplication with Christ's emphasis on sex only within marriage to one other person. He then pushed for feedback: "Tell me how AIDS gets spread."

Bonga, at 18 the oldest teen present, made a comment in Zulu that set all the children laughing. No one would translate for Mr. Smith, who grew up in South Africa and knows some Zulu but not this—we find out the next day that Bonga was trash-talking about oral sex—so he pushed on: "How many of you have heard at school or at the clinic that you must have protected sex?"

They all knew what he meant. A sign on the door of the nearby medical clinic offers free condoms, and that day representatives of an international organization had shown up in their Land Rover to make sure their doctrine was being taught. But Mr. Smith insisted, "The Bible says sex with the person you

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marry is the only protected sex. . . . If we have sex with someone who's not our wife or our husband, we're stealing from someone—and if you steal from another, chapter four of First Thessalonians says the Lord is the avenger, and He will avenge all things."

The teens were silent. Mr. Smith pressed his point: "We prevent getting AIDS by abstaining from sex until we are married. God designed sex for marriage. . . . Those who are married know that sex is best when it's with one person for the rest of your life. God's design is always best for us. Right now, young men are sleeping with three, four, five girlfriends. That's why we have all these funerals."

Bonga wasn't buying. "Black people are not the same as white people," he said. "Black people do not abstain." Mr. Smith responded, "I understand that the Zulu people like to say they do things differently. But this is not about what Rob thinks, nor about what the white man thinks. This is about what God thinks. If you reject this you're not rejecting man, but God."

Bonga continued to insist: "We have sex before marriage." Mr. Smith shot back, "But Bonga can get AIDS and die."

Unless he gets a new attitude based on a new worldview, Bonga is likely to be dead within five years. But others are listening.

"THEY SEE WE'RE HERE TO

IN THE ZAMBIAN BUSH COUNTRY, WE RODE ON the back of a Mitsubishi flatbed truck with 39 Africans jubilantly and melodically singing of their faith in Christ: "He is not number eight. He is not number six. He is number one." Standing behind the cab was like being at the prow of a ship with the wind blowing hard, and dirt roads tough on truck suspensions taking the place of waves.

We rode past mud huts with thatched roofs, ducking branches as the truck darted between short, moisture-starved trees, watching out for thorns like fishhooks that have an African name translated as, "Where do you think you were going?" People got off at thatch-covered mega-huts in four of the perhaps 500 villages of the Tonga tribe. Each time Africans and Americans greeted each other with formal words—"How are you doing, my brother?"—and lots of informal hugs.

The two-hour church service at one of the villages, Siamusambo, was one that would awaken even jaundiced members of suburban evangelical churches: Zack Brady, a 20-year-old spending his summer helping out in Zambia, exuded afterwards, "I love it. It's a thrill. . . . There's nothing like it." With 85 Africans sitting on bricks—men on one side clapping and women on the other side, some nursing babies, dressed in their wrap-around best—hymns and spiritual songs wafted over the still air.

Men's and women's quartets and quintets often led the singing and showed off dance steps like those of the Temptations, their elegance marred only by pressure to get an awkward American male to join in, with friendly laughter overcoming politeness when he did. Before and after the service, local leaders like Padmore Mudanga, Edward Kampwala, and Samson Mulubulaha, son of a village headman, spoke of their enthusiasm for Christianity and their friendliness toward America.

The enthusiasm is unsurprising, given the alternative in African tradition: what Mike Jones, who grew up on a North Carolina farm and now teaches Zambians better agricultural techniques, calls "a fear-based culture." Traditionally in tribal Zambia, bad omens are everywhere. For example, if an owl comes to a Zambian's house or a tree nearby, it means that someone in the family will die or be very sick. Zambians often believe that the spirits of ancestors inhabit the blossoms of the mighty baobab tree, and that a lion will eat anyone who plucks from it a flower.

With witch doctors still active in the Zambian bush, it's sometimes hard to leave such fears behind. Babies traditionally wear around their necks little charms that are supposed to protect them from demons. Jerry Beall, a Maryland pastor who is executive director of Sons of Thunder, a nonprofit group that has created an orphanage and schools for children and Zambian farmers, reports that "when we get ready to dedicate a baby to Christ, we ask for the charm. It's a real challenge: The mothers stand there with a life-and-death choice they have to make, and you can see on their faces the concern."

But when the choice is made, the joy is great. Adults and children in village after village greeted standees on the flatbed truck with friendly waves, and many dozens of smiling children ran after it. Zambians are friendly toward Americans, Mr. Beall says, because "they see we're here to give and not take."

TOP: SUSAN OLASKY • MAP: DAVID FREELAND

GIVE AND NOT TAKE."

"THERE'S NOTHING LIKE IT": Siamusambo church building, where attenders each carry in two bricks on which to sit.

The giving doesn't just happen. Sons of Thunder has its Zambian base because members of Damascus Wesleyan Church, located in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., made a hard choice in the mid-1990s.

The church at that point had a small sanctuary and a growing congregation. It had to divide into two services, and most people didn't like doing that, especially because the sanctuary wasn't even big enough for the second service, which had to meet in a local school.

But when church members and associates donated and pledged $287,000 in a special offering one Sunday, it didn't go toward a new building. That money went to purchase a 99-year-lease on 10,000 acres in Senkobo, Zambia, 15 miles north of Livingstone and the Zimbabwe border. The land came with a beautiful farm house, 2,700 fruit trees, trees, cattle and other animals, four deep wells, three dams, a tobacco curing barn that could be turned into apartments, and other farm buildings that could become orphanages and classrooms.

"Never got a new sanctuary," Mr. Beall, then the Damascus pastor, said as we scampered up a rise and could see where elephants had paraded through the property. "See how much more we got." How much more includes:

- An elementary school now with 300 students and five teachers, all men, who receive $120-$150 per month from Sons of Thunder.
- Continued offering of a three-year course—in Bible study and improved farming techniques—that is already changing surrounding villages spiritually and physically.
- An orphanage to which motherless children close to death are brought; one named Hope was born two months prematurely and weighed less than two pounds when she arrived. She survived, as have 34 others in the home, with the oldest not yet 4 years old.
- Teams of volunteers who pay for the opportunity to come for two weeks to three months and help with Sunday worship and daily activities.
- Two- and three-bedroom homes for teachers and students that cost $7,000-$8,000 to build.
- The church services.
- The love of America that such activities generate. As Pastor (that's his first name) Hanguzu said, "America is a good place. I know that because I have seen friends come from there to assist us."

Other Africans also freely spoke of what the work means to them. Anderson Mwiikisa, 85, who teaches Bible classes, said of Mr. Jones, "If it weren't for him, these children would be in the grave. . . . I think, 'If he can come from America to help us, I can do this.' I will keep preaching until they put dirt on my gray hair."

In the agricultural/Bible program, each family receives for three years 25 acres (with a water source, oxen, and a plow) of the 10,000-acre spread. The men study the Bible from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. three days a week and farm at other times; classes are called off during peak planting and harvesting times.

Mr. Jones shows them how to prepare the soil, substitute new crops for the traditional maize (which, given fertilizer costs and the need for a lot of water, is a losing proposition), and plant the right seeds at the right time. Mr. Beall says, "Everything we do has to be what they can replicate with oxen and plow." The farming students sell part of their crop to Sons of Thunder to pay for the oxen and plow that they take back to their villages after the third year, along with their new biblical and agricultural knowledge.

The program has a dozen graduates so far, and more dropouts than that: Mr. Jones says, "Some think it's too tough. . . . Some misbehave and show no genuine repentance." Nor has it been easy for the pioneering Americans. Mr. Jones almost died in 1998 when someone shot at him with an assault rifle, and highly poisonous puff adders like to lie on warm walking paths. But this is the frontier.

At dinnertime one night late last month, two wooden tables went together lengthwise so that eight people could sit on a side, with one other at each end. The next night a third wooden table came out to accommodate more folks. Community, a buzzword at many suburban churches, is by necessity a reality here. No television. No internet. A lot of singing after dinner.

But there's also solitude. Mr. Beall walked out to a dam away from the house and said, "I like to come out here early in the morning. It's so quiet."