

Weep not Child

...Dutch comforting Sonda youths

BY JAMES CHAVULA

TO BE orphaned in this age when parents' deaths are a daily date and finding a foster parent is becoming a rainbow chase with time is a painful matter of life in the country. Awful, to live is, and tearful. Mostly for those being rendered parentless by forces too slippery to grip.

There is no better way to begin a beautiful story of a rural community located in the outer reaches of Mzuzu than recount the agony forcing the nation to tears.

Elsewhere, it is war that put asunder the parental closeness Africans feel towards children of their demised next of kin and folk. In the peace-loving Malawi it is the rising number of orphans due to HIV/AIDS that is annihilating the mighty extended family that was synonymous with a God-fearing people.

Not many a bereaved lot are anxious to take aboard their relatives' child, not really because they are hard-hearted, but because they either already have some under their roofs or they are too poor to sustain them. After all, apart from their board and lodge, one has to consider the cost of educating them if they are to mean anything in the cruel world.

But the minute HIV is chalking bigger devastation. When the Dutch dentists visited Sonda in the periphery of Mzuzu in the 1980s they quickly discovered that the pandemic was a weevil relentlessly gnashing lives and productivity of local masses. Especially youths, under-fives and elderly living without social and economic mainstays.

The dentists' strong Jaws had found something to chew. Naïve it was to bewail the symptoms of tapering extended family, if they did not do anything to alleviate the plight of the ultimate losers.

Instead of building dykes to isolate these 'most vulnerable of this third world county', the Hollanders erected a bridge linking them back to the larger community where they belong, albeit more industrious on their return

Sonda Youth and Community Development Programme (SYCDP), launched on Thursday, 4th January this year is that Bridge.

"When the doctors returned to Holland, they start mobilizing resources to support the empowerment of vulnerable members of the local community by constructing Sonda Vocational and Skills Training Centre," related Professor John Uta, board Chairman of Sonda Youth and Community Development Program.

Today SYCDP center stands as a token of 'weep not child' to humanity rescued at near-hopelessness. The point where the last door was clicking shut and another is, surprisingly, flings wide, wide open.

It took strength and initiative of one woman, Lincy Kamanga, who worked tirelessly with the Dutch practicing and retired medics' grouping called Friends of St Johns and Sonda in The Netherlands. When she asked for help, she was summoned to Holland to present and defend the case of unaided children of Malawi.

Ben de Ponti, Board Chairman of the Netherland-based group that solicited funds for the construction of the centre, was brought aback to see the centre up and right. Dreams come true.

"To talk about it was easy. But to make it a reality was a different story. We discovered it needs patience, aspiration, inspiration and desperation, said the Dutch.

A bird-eye view on its sub-T/A Unyolo Lungu location: The area has over 7000 inhabitants, comprising about 1400 orphans, 940 non-orphaned needy youths and 210 over-aged and infirm. The rest are predominantly Israelites laboring for a hand-to-mouth life in Egypt –they burn bricks, which they sell to Mzuzu urban.

Established to reduce suffering and improve living standards of the underprivileged by empowering them through skill training, counseling, early child development and academic support, it admits Pre-school nursery children as well as 140 youths between the ages of 14 and 24. Lunch shall also be free to both.

The latter are going to don vocational skills in carpentry, tinsmith, Horticulture, tailoring and textile design, Bricklaying, knitting and Home management on free but non-residential basis. Successful students shall be honored with certificates of recognition for TEVETA and the Sonda center itself. Afterwards they can establish own businesses and employ others.

"With two intakes per year, each course has an annual capacity of 20 students. But priority shall be given to orphans and most needy within the area," says SYCDP program manager Manfred Gondwe, "depending on availability of resources other interested youths who are out of school may also be trained."

The area's parliamentarian Good Kayira adds: "The youth centre marks transformation of Sonda both in infrastructures and people's welfare. We are grateful to those who hatched the idea. Now children will have a home and a future. Youths will be useful and independent."

For professor Uta although it is sweet to uplift youths' and community economic status, it is, however, so dwarfing to note that it took friends from the Netherlands, over 8000miles overseas to build the center that promises to consolidate the shattering and scattering dreams of the helpless Malawian children.

"Friends indeed," says the professor "it's a globalised world. When the friends of St John and Sonda came in the 1980s, had seen the suffering and here they are helping. Real friends show their fondness in time of need."

For Sister Yvonne Ayotte, Coordinator of Youth of Mzuzu Diocese that owns the centre through St Johns Hospital, it is an act of God incarnate to champion the cause of the lowly.

"I can see God working through humanity to reach out to the needy. To start a thing is one thing and to accomplish it is another. But with love it is possible and it lasts," says the nun.

Paying homage to the accomplishment in Tumbuka staccato, the language his target audience would understand without tussles and hustles, Dutch doctor de Ponti says it is an icon of the love children deserve.

“Ise wabwezi wa Sonda tili wakujikwezga chifukwa chachitemwa chinu. Mpaka Kunthazi tiwenge wakukondwa pala Mupwelelenge wana winu mu chitemwa. Mungatenge sonda inichitilenge vichi, Kweni Niyichitilengechi,” He said.

He might have meant more than the literal translation “We [Dutch friends of Sonda] are feeling big because of your love, people of Sonda. We will be more proud if you continue upbringing your children with love. Do not ask what the centre will do for you, but what you can do for it.”

Put simply, the tree planted would hardly bloom if the people at Sonda do not care for it.

“Let it bloom both in dry and rainy seasons. Only Sonda can make the project succeed or fail. It’s not expensive to wake up and care for children. It is everybody’s duty,” explained de Ponti, a dentist who worked at Mzuzu-based St Johns Hospital in the late 1970s.

Such are humanitarian words of people whose nation, is ironically, engraved in the hall of shame for its red light streets notoriously littered with the nude beauties of ‘van –bra, bra’ kinds and sorts engaging in legalized prostitution, despite that they were raised in better-to-do homes than their Malawian counterparts.

But Netherlands is also famed for its dykes, fortresses encircling a nation partly located below the sea level. Dykes are wondrous epitomes of architecture, possibly, equal to Egypt’s Pyramids and the ruins of Zimbabwe, give or take few attributes.

“The dykes took Holland Fortunes. It was not the money and time, but the unity to save [or serve] human kind that was important,” says Kayira.

, The Sonda center is a Symbolic dyke to keep away the youth from plunging into the sub-zero morality zone where prostitution, alcoholism and drug abuse is virtually an easy outlet from the pain of joblessness –Oh! How it pains to go to sleep without knowing what you would do upon waking up the next morning!

“We the Dutch believe if you work together you can make a better world where children are safe and youths protected” said de Ponti.

26-year-old Charlotte van Eck, a Dutch doctor at Mzuzu-based St Johns Hospital and a first-timer in Africa, has not stayed in Malawi since May 2006 without noticing the contrast between African and European upbringing. Following her parent’s footsteps as member of Friends of St Johns and Sonda, she sees the newly launched centre promising as a promise of a future for the vulnerable multitudes.

“Unlike in Holland where you are assured of good nutrition, health services and education, here things are difficult. There is poverty; chances of schools and hospitals are distant apart. Worse still, transportation and communication are a problem.”

“I hope it’s going to work out very well so that the underprivileged children will have a good chance and the world will sit back and admire how they are doing,” says Van Eck.

All is well with a good carpenter when his equipment is well. Unlike many educational structures devoid of equipment and qualified teachers in the country, the model site has skilled instructors and adequate machines to ease students’ learning.

“It’s the of its kind in the north,” says Gondwe. But the programme manager pleads “But I hope it is not the last one. Let there is more Sondas in all parts of the Country.”

There are more youths in the abyss sobbing for a chance. What a big relief it would be if organizations heeded their cry and say “WEEP NOT CHILD,” the Dutch style!

END