

Return to
Mathare
Valley
by HAL DONALDSON

“One of the neediest places on earth”

Eight years have passed since my last visit to the slum known as Mathare Valley in Nairobi, Kenya. During this time memories of children lapping water out of sewage-filled streams and eating food off garbage heaps haunted me.

I wanted to believe conditions had improved, that the 180,000 residents were somehow being rescued from poverty and disease. I hoped to see pure running water, toilets, new homes and adequate food.



Randy Hurst photo

return

But as our vehicle enters the slum,

my hopes are quickly dashed. It's apparent Mathare Valley has not lived down its reputation as "one of the neediest places on earth." The population has swelled to 250,000, and HIV/AIDS and malnutrition still rule this area of makeshift huts like ruthless tyrants.

Our vehicle maneuvers into the compound of Mathare Valley Christian Center, where Pastor Peter Nuthu and his wife, Jane, welcome our team with wide smiles and hearty handshakes.

The nearly 300 slum children who attend school at the compound race to greet Mike and Linda McClafin, Africa regional directors, and Greg Beggs, East Africa area director. Grinning widely, the kids are eager to shake hands or get a pat on the back from the Assemblies of God missionaries who have helped feed, clothe and educate them.

Linda started a children's outreach here 20 years earlier. Now, like a mother returning home to care for her young, she hugs the boys and girls one by one.

"Seeing what has become of your labors must bring you a lot of satisfaction," I comment to Linda.

"Yes, very much," she responds, wiping a tear from her eye. "These children are very special to me."

The church's outreach to street children began shortly after Peter, now general treasurer for the Kenya Assemblies of God, arrived as pastor 10 years ago. Once a week, he fed 12 street children who helped him complete some work on the church property. For months he prayed that God would provide the resources to feed hundreds more street children each day. He recognized the desperate need and the opportunity; he simply didn't know where to find funding.

In 1998, Randy Hurst, AG World Missions communications director, and I accompanied Don Corbin, then Africa regional director, to Mathare Valley. The immeasurable

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Randy Hurst

desperate need overwhelmed us. Our hearts were touched in ways that have never diminished. When the article and photographs were published in *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*, readers were given the opportunity to contribute to the expansion of the feeding ministry. The unprecedented response provided enough funds to feed 300 children a day for eight years.

Today, Mathare Valley Christian Center feeds and clothes children, offers medical screenings and provides boys and girls with an education. Many are orphans, having watched their parents die from AIDS, tribal conflict or drought. Because the compound has no living quarters, the children return to the slums every night to sleep on mud floors in hovels.

Our team sets out on a walking tour of the area, where each day thousands of children fight for survival. Trudging along muddy paths, we shield our noses from the odor. The images of poverty and suffering evoke uncontrollable tears.

Young children sniff glue to take away their hunger pangs. Narrow streams trickle with raw sewage. Scrawny, listless children scavenge through piles of garbage. Dogs and oversized rats wander in search of food. An entourage of boys and girls forms behind us, each one hoping for a donation of coins or morsels of food.

A disabled woman invites us into her tiny shack. Her blouse is a frayed T-shirt and a vest from a man's suit. She says the church cares for her and her children. Through an interpreter, she says, "I would not be alive and I would not know Jesus without the church and my pastors."

Peter replies, "God loves you, Sister."

Nearby another woman welcomes us into her 6-foot-square dwelling, where she cares for her three children.



Gaylon Wampler

When her brother and sister-in-law passed away months earlier, she assumed responsibility for their four children as well. Now all seven children are enrolled in the school. Finding enough food for the kids without the church's help would be impossible, she says.

We meet a young couple recently saved through the church's outreach in Mathare Valley. Greg prays for them, inviting God to guide their lives and use them to win others to Christ. Tears of peace and joy cascade down the wife's cheeks. As with many in Kenya, the couple is unemployed and finding it difficult just to survive.

Pressing further into the village, I encounter a young boy wearing a scowl. With open sores on his cheeks and forehead, he fixes his eyes on mine. I can't read whether he's angry, suspicious or merely pleading for help. When I reach out my hand, he complies with a handshake and a smile.



"What caused these sores?" I ask Greg.

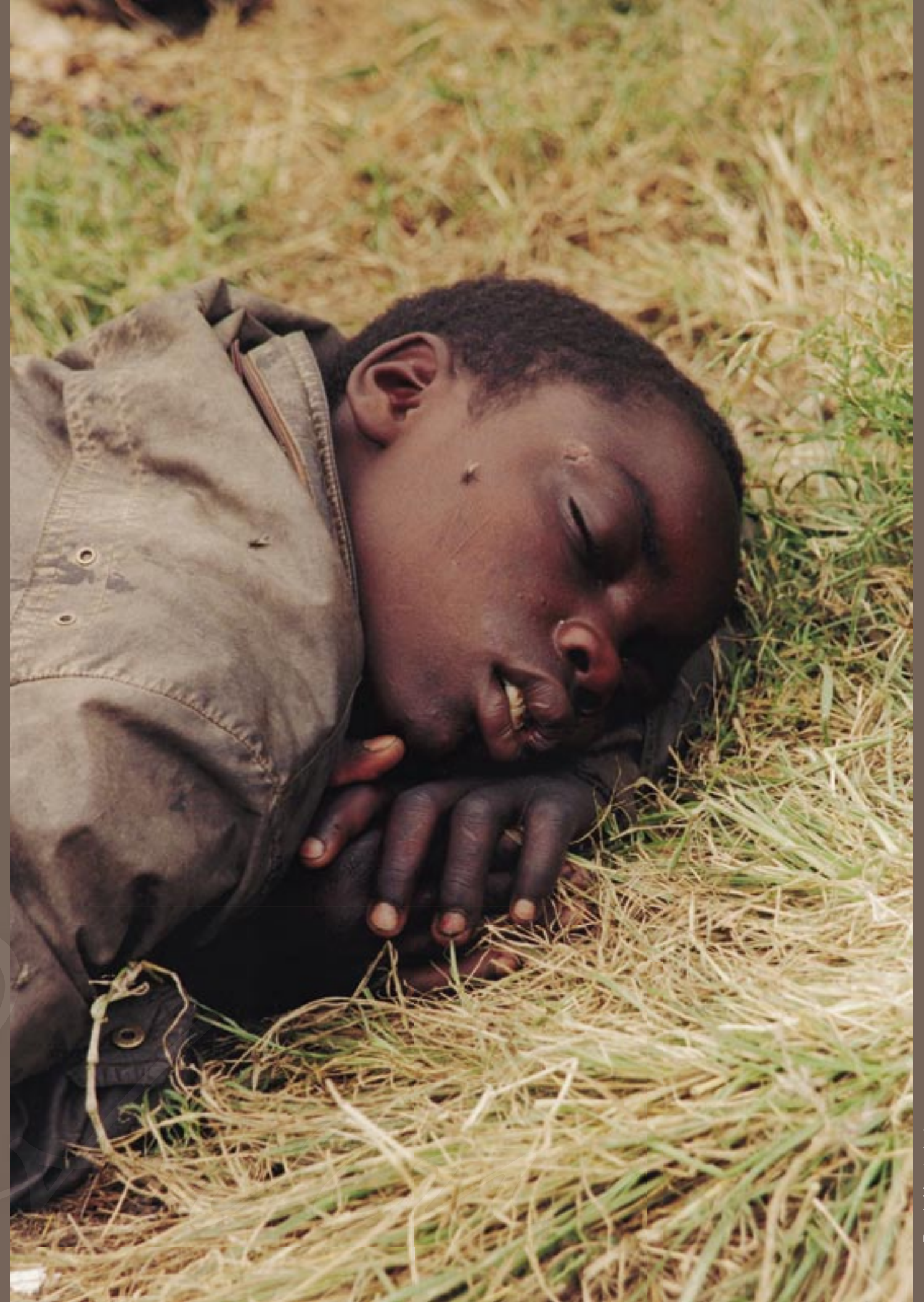
"Bathing is not necessarily a priority here," he says. "But it's a skin disease of some kind."

To God and myself, I whisper, "What hope do these kids have unless we rescue them?"

We enter a clearing where several teenagers are collapsed in the dirt. Other youth are stationed there like sentries. We have stumbled onto a place where they bury and ferment alcohol. "White lightning," as they call it, contains a shot of jet fuel to give it an extra kick. Mike says the sleeping teens probably drank their wages last evening.

Peter notes that nine Assemblies of God churches have been planted in Mathare Valley. Youth leaders from Mathare Valley Christian Center live in the heart of the community, safeguarding slum children enrolled in the school. Peter

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says the children are always in danger of gangs, drugs and violence. "Guns are plentiful here," he says.

Returning to the compound, we're introduced to several young men who graduated from the church school and now are headed to Bible college.

Peter says, "One day they will plant more churches and help us make a lasting difference in Kenya. One of the boys once ran with gangs, sniffed glue and survived on the streets. Now he's praying God will supply the funds to send him to Bible school."

Mike leans over and says, "As you can see, the church in Kenya understands the progression from compassion ministries to discipleship to church planting."

We also meet some of the schoolteachers who give of their time to train these children. One day, Peter says, they hope to have the resources to employ a full-time faculty.

I ask one instructor why she volunteers to teach at the school.

She replies, "That is my way of honoring God — by helping these street children get a better life."

We are asked to take seats at a table, and the children commence with a special performance in honor of Mike, Linda and Greg. "We're happy to see you today," they sing. "Jesus loves you, He loves me, He loves all of us."

An older student steps to the front and reads a letter: "We are honored to have servants of God like you visit us."

Thank you for not forgetting us.

Enough food and water seems like a dream. Thank you for giving to us. Because when you give to the poor, you are lending to God."

The children break into more choreographed singing and clapping, but this time we're invited to join them in their traditional dance. As sounds of joy reverberate from the compound, I can't help but contrast these children with the



Gaylon Wampler



Left to right: Mike McClafin, Hal Donaldson and Greg Beggs with children reached through local ministries

ones living outside the gate who have no food.

When the music fades and the children are seated, Mike stands to address them. "How many of you know Jesus?" he asks. Hands shoot up everywhere. Mike begins to pray for God's protection and provision, but his voice breaks and he can't restrain his tears. He knows some of these children have HIV/AIDS, and many are orphans. Without God's help, they will not live to adulthood.

"Hal," he says, "I'm thankful for how this church and Assemblies of God World Missions are reaching out to these kids, but millions more across this continent are dying from malnutrition and disease. May God help us to do more. We can't stop until there are no more Mathare Valleys."

Peter and Jane conclude the program with a word of thanksgiving and a message to take back to the United States: "Please thank all our friends in America for giving so these kids could receive help and be saved," Jane says.

We have dedicated our lives to helping these children. God loves them and wants us to care for them. He does not want them to die because of AIDS or lack of food. Please tell the people in America that we could help many more children if God provides the resources. People are begging us to take their children into our school and many orphans need our care too. Please pray with us."

The children are dismissed and race to their places in the food line. Like American kids awaiting scoops of ice cream, these children gather with plates in hand around vats of



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vegetable stew and rice. For many of them it will be the only meal they will receive this day.

The 8-year-old images that haunted me have not been erased. Instead, more have been added. And they moved me to more prayer, more tears and more determination to tell their story so others might respond to help. We may not be able to fully resurrect Mathare Valley from poverty. But we can offer peace and hope to many hundreds — possibly thousands — of desperately needy children.



Jane ushers a tiny girl to meet me. She is 14 but much smaller than my 8-year-old daughter. Her eyes reflect a hint of despair. Jane explains that the girl has HIV/AIDS, and apparently the disease and medication have affected her growth. Her shoes are two sizes too large and her dress is held together by two safety pins.

Instinctively I stoop down, wrap my arms around her and pray, “Jesus, help her.” I can muster no more words — my heart is too torn. All I can do is hold her close and silently ask the Lord to do a miracle for her and thousands of other slum children in Mathare Valley through people like me. **tpe**

Postscript: Thirty days later, Convoy of Hope returned with new socks and shoes for 300 children and a commitment to fund the feeding program.

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