

PURE RELIGION

A Disease Dimly Remembered

It is a disease dimly remembered by most Americans but in some areas of the world, measles is deadly, taking an estimated 500,000 lives each year, most of them children.

In 2003, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made a major commitment to the International Red Cross to provide funds and labor to help immunize a million children each year.

As part of that commitment, Church Humanitarian Services asked Terry and Danne Morris of the Creekside Ward, Alpine Utah West Stake, to travel to Africa and help coordinate these measles vaccinations. Although Terry, a retired dentist, had a medical background, and although he and his wife had served a previous humanitarian mission in Indonesia, they weren't sure what they would do once they arrived in Africa. It wasn't long before they discovered they weren't alone in their efforts.

Local members of the Church were organized and made a major effort going door to door to tell people about the opportunity to have their children vaccinated. In all, more than 2,000 members assisted in the campaign donating nearly 95,000 hours of their time. They helped put up more than 70,000 posters and distributed more than 200,000 flyers.

A recent convert to the Church, Parfait, was a world champion kick-boxer and a famous, well-loved celebrity in Madagascar. He graciously agreed to do a TV spot with Primary children encouraging people to "kick measles" out of Africa. Another member of the Church wrote a song about getting children immunized that played day and night on local radio.

"It's hard to tell who benefited the most," Terry Morris says, "Those who received the vaccinations or those who gave of themselves to serve others."

The Lyatuu family in Tanzania, for example, dedicated many hours to this effort. After Brother Lyatuu spent hours going door to door, his wife, who was not a member of the Church, asked if she could help. And so she, too, began going door to door. Their 18-year old son also wanted to help. Each day, he took a bus to the end of the line, walked 2 hours to the vaccination station, worked ten hours assisting the medical specialists there, then made the long trip home again.

One member in Mozambique said, "I felt such joy serving as a volunteer. I did not have the opportunity to serve a mission but this experience gave me the chance to serve others. It felt good."

In one area, so many families arrived from surrounding villages wanting immunizations, the campaign had to be extended an extra three days. When they explained there was no money to pay the workers for the extra time, many grumbled and wanted to quit. In the midst of this, one person pointed out a member of the Church who had been volunteering his time for ten days without being paid once. He had done it for his country and for the children. Because of his example, some of the members of the teams came out and worked the final three days.

"At first we wondered what we could do to make a difference," Brother Morris says, "but now we know that not only were many families spared the heartbreak of a dreaded disease, but those who gave of themselves grew stronger as a result of their service."

