

**Abundance Chidazembe Empowerment Group, Zimbabwe  
Partnered with St. Luke's UMC Serve Ministry, March 2020 – March 2023**

From: Abundance Group  
To: St Luke's umc, Orlando

Receive our lovely greetings in Jesus' name. As Abundance group we are so grateful to you for your support through this journey of empowerment, since the year 2020. Bringing your support to us gave us a second chance to life. We had lost hope, because we used to face so many challenges in life. We would sleep with empty stomachs, wear torn clothes and we would walk bare footed. We had lost hope that we would live a happy life without pain. We used to live a life a pain, tears always on our eyes cause of lack of our needs.

Giving us your support made us happy and see our dreams coming true. We were supported with income generating funds so that we work with our hands doing projects. We now know our rights we are happy now. We are now paying fees to our siblings and by them school shoes, bags, books and clothes. Some group members attended vocational training skills. We now eat more than 3 times and we now go to church because we see God's hand in our lives. as in the bible it say 2 Peter 3: 8, He has perfect timing, never early, never late. God is never in a hurry but he is always on time. We are now valued in the community.

Everyday we pray for you and your families for the love you show us. May the love of God follow you everyday of your lives. Abundance Group is in much joy through your support and we pray for you to extend the love of helping you have in your heart to other children who are like us. Thank you so much for your support and love

Your faithful  
Chairperson  
Takudzwa  
Mudzinyanya

## GRADUATION!!



*Members of the Abundance Group at time of graduation*

### **Group Member Retention**

Nearly all members who began the program three years ago were still active at the time of graduation. This is a testament to how the youth helped each other face the difficult task of overcoming their many challenges. It was their goal that no one should be left behind. Over the three years of the program, 11 children were adopted into families and one dependent moved out of their household (see details on page 11).

### **Group Projects**

**Nutrition gardens:** The group established a nutrition garden on one hectare of land provided by the local traditional leader. They grow a variety of crops including covo, tsunga, rape, cucumbers, butternuts, onions, green beans, and tomatoes. Zoe Empowers initially provided garden seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. They shared the produce for consumption and sold the surplus. The group invested some of the profits back into the garden by purchasing fertilizers, water pipes, and sprinklers. This allowed them to specialize in growing potatoes, beans, and carrots. Any excess profits were put into their group table bank. The group plans to continue their agricultural activities after graduation.

**Table banking:** Each head of household contributes \$5 a month into this fund. The money is then loaned out at a 10% interest rate. Members have used the loans to build houses, construct toilets, pay school fees, purchase large livestock, start new businesses, and pay medical bills. They plan to continue the bank after graduation.

**Broiler project:** The group started a broiler chicken project in the second year of the program. They began with 100 chickens and are now on their eighth batch. They sell the meat to local restaurants and the manure to other community members. The profits from this project were used to purchase food in bulk for distributing among the families and blankets for each member.

### **Group Activities**

The group assists each other in the construction and renovation of homes and toilets by fetching sand, concrete, and water to construction sites. The group also assisted one another to build plate racks and dig rubbish pits. Following their training on COVID-19 prevention, the group helped to raise awareness on how to stop the spread of the virus in the community. The group also provided garden produce to five elderly people in their community.

## **Income Generation**

Zoe Empowers Zimbabwe organized business training sessions throughout the three years of the program so that all youth could become entrepreneurs and create a sustainable means of supporting themselves and their families. After developing business plans and attending vocational training as needed, the heads of household received grants and start-up kits to begin their businesses in the first year. They were then encouraged to expand their business or start second businesses. The following is a compilation of their business activities.

### **Businesses started with initial grants, table bank loans, or savings:**

16 do market gardening	27 breed livestock	4 caterers/ bakers*	3 carpenters*
18 retail projects	2 do fish farming	3 barbers*	1 hairdresser*

### **Businesses started by siblings separate from head of household:**

4 do market gardening	1 phone repairer*	1 barber*
12 breed livestock	1 hairdresser*	2 tailors*
1 mechanic*	1 caterer/baker*	3 carpenters/ joiners*

Vocational training: Out of the 21 members that are running vocational skills businesses (marked above with asterisks), 14 youths used their own funds for training and to purchase materials and seven received the training and support directly from Zoe.

Community employment: The members of this group regularly employ 13 people from the community: six in retail, two in carpentry, two in catering, and three in market gardening.

## **Financial Security:**

All families save some money by participating in table banking. Additionally, 23 hold money in livestock and six do mobile banking. During their time with Zoe, they have made significant investments which will help them continue growing their wealth including buying land (3), cows (9), and a scotch cart (1).

## **Food Security**

Before entering the program, nearly all households ate only once a day and had to beg for food. After Zoe, the quality and quantity of their diets have improved. All households are now able to eat two to three meals per day.

Members were trained on basic practices of farming by the Agricultural Extension Officer (AGRITEX) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Zoe provided each of the households with 10kg of maize seed, 50 kg of fertilizer, and 200 ml of insecticide. Zoe provided livestock for five families.

All families now have a kitchen garden of vegetables, grow various crops, and keep livestock.

<b>Kind of crops</b>	<b># of families</b>
Maize	30
Groundnuts	23
Sorghum	10
Cow peas	22
Sunflowers	11

<b>Types of livestock</b>	<b># of families</b>
Traditional Chickens	30
Cows	9
Sheep	2
Turkeys	8
Guinea Fowl	5
Rabbits	6

### **Education**

- 24 children started regularly attending primary school
- 20 students started regularly attending secondary school
- Zoe provided school fees, stationary, and school uniforms for 7 siblings

### **Health & Hygiene**

All households received training on environmental hygiene, disease prevention, and gender specific health issues from the Ministry of Health and Childcare and the Environmental Health Department. Zoe provided households with personal hygiene kits that included towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, laundry soap, petroleum jelly, mosquito repellent, sanitary wear, reusable face masks, and 20-liter buckets. During the Covid-19 outbreak, the group was given a water-tapped bucket, hand soap, and hand sanitizer. All households now have access to safe drinking water. All households also have resources to get health care services and purchase medications as needed. Four group members were assisted by Zoe to receive medical care and two members were assisted through the group's resources to receive medication and transport to medical care.

### **Housing**

- 3 families built new homes using their own resources and receiving mutual help through the group
- 22 families made significant improvements/repairs to their homes- 4 received cement from Zoe and 18 used their own resources
- 3 families moved to better housing
- 2 families installed solar panels
- 5 families built new latrines and received cement and roofing sheets from Zoe
- 13 families built or repaired latrines using their own resources

### **Spiritual Strengthening**

Prior to Zoe, most children felt as if God had abandoned them and they did not attend church on a regular basis. This was because of the hardships they experienced in their life, including hunger and discrimination. They also did not have the time to attend church because they were begging for food or doing piece jobs. After Zoe, all households now attend church regularly and believe that God loves them. They also have appropriate church attire. Six children have leadership roles within the church.

### **Family Highlight**

Group member Takudzwa started a successful fish farming business. She built eight 50 m x 20 m fishponds on a tract of inherited land. Each pond contains over 4,000 fish, and she supplies large wholesalers including Mega Markets, Thomas Meikles, Bigbyte, and OK Mart. Her successful venture has made her an inspiration to others in the community. She used the profits from the business to build a three-bedroom house with a kitchen, buy two cows, and pay school fees for her siblings.

## FIRST YEAR CASE STUDY REPORT - April 2021

*The Zoe Empowers program facilitator who works with your group provided the following report on the activities and achievements of a household supported by your partnership. Although each child is unique, this report reflects the challenges and progress of every household as they move through Zoe's empowerment model. Additional information about your group's progress follows this case study.*

**Head of Household:** Fadzi (Precious) (21)

**Dependents:** Sister – Anna (14)

**Challenges:** Fadzi's parents passed away when she was young. She was left in the custody of her uncle. She faced many challenges in life, most importantly securing food daily. She often ate only roasted maize or slept on an empty stomach. Fadzi dropped out of school right after her parent's deaths since she was unable to afford the school fees. She became a beggar and would sometimes work in other people's fields and be given a plate of food as payment after completing the farm work. However, due to the unbearable situation and the injustices she faced in her community, Fadzi married a man who was already married which was customary in their apostolic sect. Life became even more difficult for Fadzi. She later realized that being married was not the only solution to escape poverty. She went back to her uncle feeling full of disgrace and sorrow until Zoe entered her life.



*Fadzi and her uncle at their home with her livestock*

**The Dream:** Training in the Dream process teaches the children how to develop a plan for achieving self-sufficiency and creating a Dream chart provides daily inspiration to work towards the goal. The following are Fadzi's most recent responses to the Dream questions:

- What makes you feel sad? *Death of my mother*
- What makes you happy? *Going to church, reading the bible*
- What happens in the community that you do not like? *Gossiping, stealing, and drinking beer*
- What is your dream for the future? *Having cattle, having my own beautiful house and being a prominent farmer*
- What will be your guiding principles to achieve your dream? *Praying hard, being a hard worker, have focus*

### Family Specific Achievements Because of Your Partnership

**Income Generation & Agricultural Projects:** After recruitment, Fadzi received entrepreneurship training followed by a grant for \$150 to start her own income generating project. She used a portion of the grant to start rearing roadrunner chickens and turkeys. She used the remaining money to begin a farming project. She planted sugar beans and other vegetables including covo (kale), tsunga (mustard greens), rape and lettuce crops to sell. She diversified early on to ensure she had multiple sources of income from a variety of projects. Fadzi resides near a big dam which she is able to use to irrigate her crops. Zoe helped support the members by creating a market linkage with potential buyers of their products in the community. She is planning on purchasing goats to start a fourth project with her savings.

Fadzi also planted a kitchen nutritional garden where she grows a variety of crops like covo, rape, tsunga and cabbages for her family's consumption to supplement their diets. In addition, Fadzi was supported with maize seed from Zoe that she planted. She harvested 3 tonnes of maize which will last her family until next season. Her turkeys and roadrunners provide her family with meat. Through her business endeavors and agricultural efforts, Fadzi's family is now able to eat three balanced meals a day. Not only did Fadzi managed to support herself, but she has become a hope to her family.



*Fadzi and her uncle in her vegetable farm*

*"Our family buried hunger and starvation soon after we were recruited into Zoe Empowers program, our enemy (poverty) is no more." - Fadzi*

**Health & Housing:** Fadzi and her group members received several health, hygiene, and disease prevention trainings. Zoe supported her with face masks, water buckets with taps to wash hands under running water, and sanitizers. She implemented lessons learned in training and constructed a plate rack and dug a dumping pit. She bathes regularly and keeps her clothes and home clean. Through their mutual help activities, Abundance Group helped Fadzi thatch her kitchen which was about to fall. She is currently saving and has plans to repair her toilet and house.

**Education, Community Relations & Spiritual Strengthening:** Fadzi reenrolled in school and can now pay her school fees and buy other educational necessities like shoes, uniforms, and books. Fadzi was educated on her rights as a child and knows how to enforce her rights and stand up for herself if they are violated. She was empowered through this training and has become a role model in her community and taken it upon herself to share the information with others. Zoe built connections with the group members and the village leaders who are constantly in touch with the beneficiaries; these relationships ensure their protection from whatever problems might arise in the area.

Zoe encouraged the youth to attend church to fellowship and create connections with the community. Fadzi is always praising God for the help she received and attends church regularly. She feels that God is good in her life and her hope and faith have been restored. After everything she has gone through, she is constantly grateful for the good Samaritans who were sent in the name of Zoe after having struggled for such a long period of time.

**Fadzi's prayer Requests:** *Pray for me so that I will expand my businesses and have a loving heart to help others who are poor in my community.*

## **GENERAL UPDATES ON THE ABUNDANCE EMPOWERMENT GROUP**

**Group Income Projects:** Abundance Group received seeds from Zoe and started a group garden. They grow rape, covo, tsunga, tomatoes, cabbages, onions, and green beans for personal consumption and to sell. Each empowerment pod started additional group projects including fish farming, farming crops, rearing goats, broiler chickens, or roadrunners, and a piggery.

**Group Activities:** Abundance Group adopted another child in the community who benefits from their nutritional garden. The child assists in watering the garden and removing weeds with the other group members. The child's nutrition has improved with the group's help. They also provide excess vegetables to other community members who are in need.

**Food Security and Agricultural Projects:**

- 30 households planted crops and had good harvests
- 30 households established kitchens gardens and grow a variety of vegetables

Livestock	# of youth
Goats	10
Chickens	15
Broilers	5

**Income Generating Activities:** All 30 members received grants and started individual income generating projects. Zoe supported 3 members with vocational skills training in catering and food preparation and carpentry. These members have not yet started these businesses.

Income Generating Activity	# of youth
Goat Keeping	10
Traditional Chickens	15
Rearing broiler chickens	5
Selling secondhand clothes	5
Buying and selling groceries	5
Rearing turkeys	1

**First Year Activities of Empowerment Groups in Zimbabwe**

*The following is an overview of the training and activities the children in the Zoe Empowers Zimbabwe program have experienced during their first year in the program.*

This review focuses on the 15 empowerment groups which were formed in March 2020 to start meeting in April 2020. It is a general outline of the support that Zoe Empowers provided to the participants in terms of trainings and inputs relating to particular thematic areas. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the timing and format of some training programs and distribution of inputs was affected.

**Income Generation**

Before involvement in Zoe Empowers, the beneficiaries survived by working in other people's fields, selling firewood, herding cattle, and doing domestic chores for hire like fetching water and cooking. Fifteen groups with an average of thirty (30) households each were recruited from rural areas of Mutare and Mutasa districts in March 2020 during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2020, there was a national lockdown in Zimbabwe where everyone was working from home. In June 2020, only essential service providers were allowed to resume operations. Fortunately, this included Zoe Empowers Zimbabwe staff and they began conducting entrepreneurship trainings with the empowerment group pods (i.e. subgroups of about five households each).

The Ministry of Woman Affairs and Small and Medium Enterprise Development Officers conducted trainings on topics of basic business management, bookkeeping, record keeping, and market linkage. By August 2020, all heads of household from the fifteen groups had completed training and received their individual income

generation grants of \$150 USD each. They began diverse income activities such as crop production, raising traditional poultry, turkeys, guinea fowl and broiler chickens, keeping and breeding goats and rabbits, buying and selling groceries or secondhand clothing, and tailoring. Later during the year, some youth attended vocational training programs in catering, carpentry, dressmaking, barbering, and construction.

### **Food Security**

Between June and September 2020, local agricultural extension officers conducted the trainings on food security including topics of climate-smart agriculture, maize production, and market gardening. The groups were then tasked to prepare land for their gardens and maize farms. The agricultural extension officers together with Zoe program facilitators monitored the land preparation process and made recommendations where necessary. As a reward for the commitment and good job that groups did in preparing their land for farming, they were supported with the following farming materials for their group garden projects:

- 25kgs of fertilizer
- 5kgs bean seeds
- 100gm cucumber seeds
- 100gm carrot seeds
- 100gm onion seeds
- 100gm tomato seeds
- 100gm rape seeds
- 100gm butternut seeds

Each household which had prepared land was given 10kgs of certified maize seed and a 50kg bag of fertilizer. Most of the beneficiaries planted on one hectare of land which their family or grandparent owned or which they are renting. The harvest for this year was very good, averaging twenty 50kg bags of maize per household which is enough to take them to the next harvest. A post-harvest training will be done in June 2021 to teach the youth how to properly preserve their harvest.

### **Health & Hygiene**

Nurses, village health workers and environmental health technicians carried out trainings on topics of personal, food, and environmental hygiene, malaria prevention, reproductive health, and Covid-19 prevention. Each child was encouraged to bathe regularly, brush their teeth, build toilets, dig rubbish pits, and get drinking water from protected sources. In addition, the groups received facemasks, towels, toothpaste, toothbrushes, hand sanitizing soap, 20-liter water buckets, and mosquito repellants. Households constructed ‘tippy taps’ for hand washing. During the lockdown, beneficiaries were kept informed on health issues by Zoe program facilitators through social media platforms and were encouraged to share information with others in their communities. Zoe supported some children facing health complications so they could access medical assistance at hospitals.

### **Child Rights**

Before the children joined Zoe, they faced challenges such as abuse, neglect from the community, and lack of identity documents. Child rights trainings conducted with assistance from the Department of Social Development and Child Care Works covered definitions of abuse, how to report abuse, birth registration, national identification registration, and inheritance issues. Some beneficiaries who were facing physical abuse like child labor were removed from the abusive families. Program facilitators have monitored and helped children address issues of abuse.

### **Spiritual Strengthening**

During the Easter celebration in April 2020, the groups received Bibles to use during their monthly trainings. For spiritual upliftment, each group has appointed a preacher and worship team from their members, even at the pod level. The beneficiaries share their favorite verses whenever they meet. In December 2020, the groups held Christmas celebrations with their siblings. They shared presents, testimonies, danced, and encouraged each other



to have faith. Due to these activities, many children are now comfortable being in fellowship with others and attending church services.

### **Housing**

An identification of vulnerable families in need of shelter was carried out by each group. These families in need were supported with cement, window frames, door frames, windowpanes, and bricks to construct and renovate their houses. Groupmates assisted each other through mutual help activities as well. Zoe specifically assisted 10 households with construction materials.

### **Education**

Prior to their involvement with Zoe Empowers, some of the beneficiaries and their siblings were not going to school due to lack of money for school fees and needing to work for food. Now that the heads of household are earning money from their businesses, they were able to reenroll their younger siblings. In some cases, Zoe provided initial assistance to help with reintegration.

### **Second Year Resources**

Soon, funds will be distributed for developing group-level income projects such as broiler keeping, goat keeping, tuck (convenience) shops, and making detergents to sell. Most of the groups have started building fowl runs and have obtained land to rear goats.

**Note about group names:** The youth choose their own group name. The first part of the name is their self-description and the second part is a reference to their location so that we can distinguish between groups that choose the same name for themselves.

**Name List:** Before an empowerment group name list is created, Zoe staff members take time to get to know the youth. They make home visits to record information about the children, their dependents, and caregivers. They assess if any emergency interventions are required to alleviate health issues, abusive conditions, or inadequate shelter. Once they have confirmed who is eligible for the Zoe program, and have allowed time for children who are not interested to drop out and others to join, then the staff creates the name list. Please note, children joining the Zoe program often have no parents or birth documentation, and have suffered multiple traumas in their young lives. Sometimes they are suspicious of the people asking questions. For these reasons, the children occasionally provide erroneous information which we later correct.

On the following page is the list of names and a picture of your specific group. The names in bold are heads of household, followed by their siblings and dependents. Although Zoe records both first and second names, we use only first names in public lists to preserve the privacy of children in the program. The ages of the orphaned and vulnerable children in the Zoe program range between infant and college age; however, the youth who is the head of household must be old enough to manage a small business and so is usually between 14 and 21 years old.

Many of the children live with an elderly grandparent or disabled caregiver. Most often such arrangements include shelter only and the caregiver is unable to provide food, education, health care or other support which children need. Child rights are especially important in such situations so that the children are not abused.

***The children are encouraged and strengthened by the knowledge that their partner is not only supporting them with resources, but also with prayer and in the belief that they are capable of great things. Thank you for making this journey of transformation with them.***

## Abundance Chidazembe Group, Zimbabwe

At graduation: 30 households and a total of 108 children (red indicates those who left, green are adoptions)



**Abshell (f) 16**  
Rayto(m) 14  
Rachel (f) 10  
Natasha (f) 13

**Apros (m) 17**  
Loice (f) 5  
Jesca (f) 2  
Leanda (f) 17

**Believe (f) 14**  
Panashe (m) 10

**Brian (m) 14**  
Makanaka (f) 2  
Bright (m) 9  
Gerald (m) 12

**Delan (f) 15**  
Julian (f) 10  
Wilma(f) 6

**Mary (f) 15**  
Joseph(m) 11  
Moses (m) 8  
Miriam (f) 6  
Blessing (f) 4  
Charles (m) 2  
Tinotenda (f) 13

**Brian (m) 15**  
Lloyd (m) 20  
Maria (f) 13

**Takudzwa (f) 17**  
Munashe (f) 14  
Ropafadzo (f) 10  
Anotidaishe (m) 10  
Teclar (f) 13

**Takunda (m) 15**  
Prisca (f) 12  
Tariro (f) 9  
Ropafadzo (f) 3  
Nokutenda (f) 11

**Thomas (m) 19**  
Arnold(m) 4  
Shupikai (m) 12

**Tavelin (m) 12**  
Yolanda (f) 18  
Oliah (f) 5  
Ayanda (f) 7  
Patel (m) 7

**Daniel (m) 15**  
Stella (f) 15

**Arnold (m) 16**  
Daniel (m) 16  
John (m) 17  
Paul (m) 11

**Esabel (f) 18**  
Melinda (f) 15  
Annamore (f) 8  
Peace (f) 6  
Nelson (m) 1

**Learnmore (m) 16**  
Nigel (m) 15  
Blessing (m) 19

**Makanaka (f) 15**  
Trinity (f) 2  
Abigail (f) 6  
Thomas (m) 9  
Shallom (f) 5  
Keilah(f) 3  
Shelia (f) 10

**Patric (m) 18**  
Tanyaradzwa (f) 7  
James (m) 13  
Noah (m) 7

**Phillip (m) 18**  
Gideon(m) 9  
Lista (m) 11

**Trish (f) 18**  
Trony (m) 15  
Trynese (f) 8  
Trybe (m) 1

**Beauty (f) 18**  
Blessing (m) 16  
Believe (f) 14  
Brighton (m)  
3weeks

**Maud (f) 20**  
Ferby (f) 16  
Mebo (f) 5  
Arnold (m) 4  
Arnold (m) 1  
Laura (f) 14

**Royal (m) 20**  
Linnet(f) 12  
Loyce (f) 10

**Panashe (m) 20**  
Munashe (m) 17

**Miriam (f) 20**  
Makanaka (f) 14  
Thomas (m) 12  
Abigail (f) 6

**Yeukai (f) 18**  
Ruvarashe (f) 6  
Divine (m) 5  
Precious (f) 3  
Prosper (m) 1

**Takudzwa (m) 19**  
Tawananyasha (m) 7  
Tatenda (f) 5

**Takudzwa (m) 19**  
Blessing (m) 16

**Fadzi (Precious)  
(f) 20**  
Anna (f) 14

**Nyasha (f) 19**

**Delight (m) 19**

**The following is an overview of how Zoe empowers orphaned and vulnerable children to move beyond the need for charity by comprehensively addressing the multiple challenges faced by those in living in extreme poverty.**

### **Group Formation**

When Zoe first enters a community to help children, we begin by engaging the local leaders. Staff members explain how Zoe is an empowerment program, enabling children to move from crippling poverty and dependency to economic and social self-sufficiency. Although different from the usual relief approach, it resonates with leaders who want to see sustainable change in their village. Since staff are indigenous to each country in which Zoe operates they understand local customs, challenges, and resources available.

During the first meeting the youth elect leaders, make rules to guide their meetings, choose a group name, and decide when and where to hold weekly gatherings. To strengthen peer bonds, groups begin shared income activities and agricultural projects. Nearly all groups immediately establish a “merry-go-round” fund to encourage meeting attendance and provide financial benefits. During meetings, group members contribute a small amount into a single pool of money which is then given in full to a different member each time. A variation involves saving the money until there is enough to make bulk purchases of small livestock, groceries, or housewares to be distributed to each member.

The youth complete training on topics of food security, health and disease prevention, business management, and child rights within the first six months. If they have access to land they receive seeds to start gardens and plant crops. If siblings are not attending school, Zoe provides uniforms and other resources to get them back into classes. Children who have skills are provided grants so that they can start small businesses, others begin vocational training. Most importantly, all begin to experience God’s love and they realize that though many are orphans, they have a Father in heaven who loves them.

### **The Dream**

One of the first tasks new members complete is the creation of their “Dream” chart. Most orphaned and vulnerable children entering the Zoe empowerment program face a daily struggle to survive; there is neither time to think about the future nor reason to hope for something better. But through Zoe and your partnership, the children learn to imagine a new life and prepare to make it a reality.

The Zoe program facilitator leads members through an exercise called the Dream process where they examine their current situation and then set their goals. After considering their family’s hopes and needs, the youth who is considered the head of the household and is the primary member of their empowerment group creates a poster of responses to a standard set of questions.



This youth then presents the Dream to the rest of the group members who express support and give feedback, especially concerning the primary goal. These Dream documents help the program facilitators better understand the conditions of the children’s lives so they can address specific needs or traumas suffered. The family keeps a copy of their Dream, often displaying it in their home to provide daily motivation as they strive to create their new life. As they progress through the empowerment program they will often update their Dream.

## **Connections**

One of the biggest disadvantages orphaned and vulnerable children face is isolation from peers and the larger community. Struggling on their own, the children lack moral support, access to community resources, and a network of people to help them progress and face challenges. Zoe creates connections.

Peer group. The youth served by Zoe have often dropped out of school and stopped attending church or community events. They do not even realize how many others share their plight, but at the first group meeting, when each new member tells their story, the bonding process begins. By working together on group projects and helping each other make improvements to their homes, friendships form and the group becomes an extended family committed to helping each other face challenges and achieve their dreams. New Zoe group members are also introduced to youth who have graduated from Zoe or been a member of another group for a couple years. These relationships provide advice based on experience, networking possibilities, and inspiration.

Program facilitator and mentor. Zoe program facilitators usually hold a diploma in social work or related fields and have experience working with children. They care deeply about the children and are available to provide counseling as needed, but they do not fill a role of guardian nor do they attend all the group meetings. This is important so that the youth develop their own problem solving abilities and can become fully self-reliant. Each group has a local mentor which they select to help represent and guide the group within their community. Mentors receive training from Zoe and then attend weekly meetings, make home visits, and help resolve challenges in the community.

Community leaders and government officials. This includes school administrators to help children return to classes; local leaders who can address cases of abuse and improperly seized property; government officials and specialists who can provide expert advice on business development, agriculture and higher education; and health service providers.

And a powerful connection is you! All Zoe groups know the opportunities they receive are from God, through the love and concern coming from their partners far away. They are amazed that you would care for them without ever having met them. This powerful connection is further strengthened if a partner can visit the country to witness what the youth have achieved.

## **Child Rights**

A major focus of Zoe's empowerment program is teaching children about the rights their local government and international laws promise. Such training is often conducted by the local officials in charge of enforcing child rights so the children get to know those who are responsible for their protection. Additionally, Zoe's group-based model creates crowd support through which the youth can defend each other from all forms of abuse; physical, financial or emotional.

In the many communities where Zoe works, young girls are particularly vulnerable to abuse and often feel they are powerless to resist. Protecting the rights of girls includes educating the entire community about the dangers and harm inherent in all forms of mistreatment, especially child marriage, sex trafficking, and female genital mutilation. Zoe's emphasis on forming gender-mixed groups strengthens the support available to girls within their groups and creates leaders who will encourage fair and just treatment for all.

Zoe's goal is to ensure that all children are able to stand up for themselves and their rights in the community. Often children in the Zoe group learn these lessons so well that they not only defend their own rights, but also the rights of others who may be abused or neglected in their communities.

## **Food Security**

Children entering the Zoe empowerment program struggle every day to alleviate their hunger. Usually they try to find work, but because they lack status or an adult advocate in their community, they are paid extremely low wages or small amounts of food. They might try growing their own food, but they do not have the resources or knowledge to succeed. It is not unusual for these children to go two or three days without eating. Occasionally they must resort to begging or even taking from a neighbor's field just to survive. Even those children who do manage to eat daily suffer health consequences from the poor nutritional quality of their meals.

With guidance from Zoe program facilitators, new groups learn what foods they need to eat as well as explore different ways to attain a stable food source. Because Zoe is an empowerment program, the children are not told what to do, but are instead given options and training so that they can devise their own approach to becoming food secure and self-sufficient.

Children in rural areas who can access land will learn about the best agricultural practices for their region and then be given the seeds, fertilizer, and tools to begin vegetable gardens and/or plant crops like maize (corn). The households are also encouraged to start raising small animals, like rabbits or chickens, after learning about animal husbandry. In Zimbabwe, a new group usually plants a group "nutritional" garden before starting their own home gardens. This provides an opportunity to learn about growing different types of vegetables, the importance of having a balanced diet, and to how to work together as a team. In urban areas where they do not have access to land for planting or raising animals, the income project development is accelerated.

## **Income Generation**

Zoe helps the youth generate an income at both the group and household level. A group project might involve growing a cash crop, raising small livestock, or producing and selling a product like soap. These projects provide experience, foster group cohesion, and produce profits for the group's savings and loan fund. Individual households also start small income generating-activities like buying and reselling food items, phone calling cards, clothing, etc. Some youth who are already skilled immediately receive resources to begin businesses in trades like tailoring, auto mechanics, or hairstyling. Zoe urges youth to continue growing their wealth and financial security by completing vocational training, expanding their business into new markets, or starting multiple businesses.

Before distributing resources, Zoe trains all the heads of households on how to craft a business plan and manage money. After this training, the group members take the following steps:

- Brainstorm what businesses could succeed in their community
- Create individual and group business plans and present these to the group for discussion
- Vote to approve the proposals or help the members create a better plan

Once the business plan is approved, the individual receives a micro-grant and/or a start-up kit. Throughout this process the Zoe program facilitator is available to provide guidance but does not tell the group what to do or make decisions for them. If a poor decision is made, the youth will learn from the experience, but still have the support of their group and Zoe to try again.

To provide money for business expansion and also generate group income, many groups establish "table banks." Members start the fund by all contributing a set amount of money which is immediately made available for short term loans with the interest paid up front. This pre-paid interest is also available for loans. The fund grows fast. Some groups pay dividends to all members, others use it for something that benefits the whole group like their Christmas party.

## **Health and Disease Prevention**

Zoe's goal is to address immediate health needs, teach the children how to live healthy lives, and connect them to medical resources. Preventative education includes:

- Basic hygiene practices such as hand washing, boiling water, and keep their home and surroundings clean
- Nutrition, especially important since the children have often had very limited diets
- Diseases transmission and treatment; especially for malaria and HIV/AIDS
- Dangers of substance abuse
- Specialized training for girls' personal health and safety

Many of the children have lost a parent to HIV infection and often the children too are suffering from the virus although they may not realize either of these facts due to a lack of testing. There is great stigma associated with the disease so that people avoid testing and are even reluctant to seek treatment. Furthermore, there is a lack of even basic information about the disease and prevention. Zoe provides supportive opportunities for children to be tested, helps them access medications, and provides extensive education to counter the many misconceptions held in the community.

After youth attend training and begin implementing basic health and hygiene standards in their homes, Zoe provides the first distribution of items like mosquito nets, sleeping mats, blankets, and hygiene products. Health insurance in Zimbabwe is expensive so the families are encouraged to have resources set aside to address medical issues. Often the empowerment groups will create a special fund to help with emergencies.

Training also includes teaching the children about the importance of improving their physical appearance and keeping their home clean and attractive in order to increase their status in the community. When the children look "smart" their confidence increases, they feel better about themselves, and others in the community begin treating them with respect and acceptance. In the second and third years of the program it is possible to pick out the once-ragged Zoe children because they are often the cleanest looking children in the village and carry themselves with pride and dignity.

## **Housing**

Often, children entering Zoe are living in houses left by their deceased parents that are in disrepair or are homeless without a permanent residence. It is also common for orphaned and vulnerable children to work in exchange for a room; this leaves them vulnerable to abuse and with little time for other activities or to earn money for food. In general, Zoe does not provide housing for the children, but it does give the group funds which they can use to help out those members in greatest need by providing temporary rent assistance or materials to make emergency repairs. In Zimbabwe, the government has high standards for new construction. As a result, most of the children focus on making repairs to their existing home and they save money for a long term goal of building a good house.

## **Education**

Zoe does not need to teach the children and young caregivers who join empowerment groups about the importance of education. These children desperately want to attend school. Prior to joining Zoe, many children participated in school, but were forced to drop out due to chronic illness, hunger, social ostracism, lack of clothing, and/or lack of money. Once in the program, the young heads of households (many of whom have been out of the educational system for too long to be reintegrated) are eager to see their younger siblings back in school as soon as possible.

So that children can quickly return to school, Zoe will meet with school administrators and assist with some of the expenses such as uniforms, fees, and materials. The group may also pay for some of these materials when there is a special need. As with all other aspects of the Zoe program, the emphasis is on empowering the children to pay for their own educational expenses. It is a great source of pride and self-esteem for the youth who are the heads of their households to be able to share how they are able to work to send their younger siblings to school. It is like hearing parents brag about the accomplishments of their children and it is very moving to see in a sibling.

### **Faith**

Often the isolation that the children feel when they begin the Zoe program extends to their thoughts about God. Because they are abused and discriminated against by their community - and often this includes Christians in their village - they believe God has also abandoned or even cursed them. At other times they believe that maybe God does not exist, or if God does exist that they are somehow beyond God's love. In the very first meeting a Zoe staff member often shares the Lord's Prayer with the children, and talk about how they are not truly orphans because they have their heavenly Father who loves them.

Meetings begin with Scripture readings, prayer, and devotions led by a group member, but while this is available to the children they are never coerced into the Christian faith. Zoe's program is religiously non-restrictive, yet offers a compelling view of the love Christians show to others. One of the most powerful parts of the empowerment program is the way these children put their faith into action in their own community. They forgive those who have harmed them; feed others who are even poorer than themselves; adopt other children and share their resources and knowledge with them; pray and care for one another; and pay fair wages to those who had once taken advantage of their situation with hard labor and poor pay. These children return good for evil and can be examples to all of what it means to live as Christians.