

**Aspiration Empowerment Group, Honde Valley, Zimbabwe  
Partnered with Creekwood UMC, March 2019 – April 2022**

***GRADUATION!!***



*Members of the Aspiration Group at time of graduation*

The group gathered on April 29, 2022 for a graduation and farewell ceremony which included much celebration and festive foods. However, because there were still Covid-19 restrictions in place limiting the size of gatherings, only the heads of household attended. During the ceremony, members shared testimonies and success stories of how they overcame their various challenges during the three-year Zoe journey. They thanked Zoe Empowers for answering God's call to save their lives. Before Zoe, most group members were hopeless and never had an idea on how they were going to improve their lives.

The mentor received a certificate of appreciation for her support to young people. Antony was given \$50 USD as an award for best performance for his projects. The award was meant to boost his thriving projects of bananas, horticulture (beans, tomatoes, and ginger), fish farm, and poultry. He was given the title of Mr. Zoe.

**Group Member Retention**

All members who began the program three years ago achieved a level of self-sufficiency and families remained part of the group for all three years. Some older siblings left to work in other locations, some younger siblings moved in with other relatives, and three families welcomed back younger siblings who previously lived elsewhere. (See original name list below on page 9 for details.)

We are writing this letter as Aspiration group  
thanking the Zee Empowers on the trainings,  
activities and projects they helped us with.  
Zee Empowers has teach us to run  
business, child rights, income generating  
activities and health and hygiene. Zee provide  
Aspiration group with money to do  
project like keeping broilers and goats.  
We learn farming from Zee Empowers  
and we have a garden. We are thanking  
the Zee Empowers for changing  
our lives by teaching us how to save money.  
Most of our group members can now eat differ-  
ent food, pay for their siblings school fees,  
build toilets and better house. We have skills  
now because we were trained vocational skills  
like carpentry, building and sewing. Zee  
Empowers pay school fees and medicine for  
some of our group members. We thank  
Zee Empowers for teaching us how to  
providend we thankful.  
We wish you to come back for us  
thank you for supporting us as Aspiration  
group.

Yours faithfully

Aspiration Chairperson

Daniel Mutanga

### Group Activities

Mutual help activities were started in the first year with the youth visiting each other's homes and assisting with various tasks. This mutual help saved members from having to hire labor for harvesting maize or molding bricks for house and toilet construction. The activities also strengthened bonds of friendship. Similarly, the group built bonds with the community by joining with other on the first Friday of every month to clean up the areas surrounding a nearby school and shopping center.

As an income activity, the Aspiration Group decided to use a Zoe grant to purchase 100 broiler chickens. They were “pioneers” of the broiler rearing project in Honde Valley and because there was little competition, people would throng to buy the broiler. Their market share grew rapidly during the initial stages of the Zoe program and this raised the morale of the group. They wanted to keep the project going and so drafted a constitution that would guide them in their day to day operation. They developed habits of cooperation and unity as they performed the tasks of feeding the broiler chickens, removing waste, observing the chickens for signs of illness, and facility maintenance. The group found a market in various restaurants around Hauna Growth Point and they shared profits every four months. The project transformed their lives.

After seeing how the Aspiration Group was running a lucrative broiler chicken project in the area, a lot of villagers started to emulate their project and the group realized they needed to shift to a less competitive endeavor. After discussions, they decided to start a business of buying and selling of groceries, agricultural inputs, and secondhand clothes. Their current business has restored their previous profitability.

They also secured a piece of land from the village head and established a garden where they grow tomatoes, carrots, rape vegetables, and butternuts. The training, tools, and seeds were provided by Zoe. The gardening project also brought the group together while being a means of educating the youth on farming.

### **Income Generation and Financial Security**

Zoe Empowers Zimbabwe organized business training sessions throughout the three years of program implementation so that all youth could become successful entrepreneurs and create sustainable means of supporting themselves and their families. After developing business plans and attending vocational training as needed, 25 heads of household received grants of \$150 USD each and the other 7 received start up kits for skills they already had. The following is a compilation of their business activities at time of graduation.

3 barber shops	5 keep goats	8 grow bananas	1 tuck shop
1 builder	6 keep rabbits	4 raising fish	5 sell secondhand
2 tailors	31 keep poultry	11 market farming	clothes and shoes

- Eleven heads of household helped their siblings start income projects.
- The eight households doing banana farming invested in irrigation pipes.

Outstanding accomplishments: The outbreak of Covid-19 impeded the progress of most of the income projects, but for Tanaka and Melody it opened the door to a new opportunity. They had already started sewing as their businesses when Zoe contracted them to sew face masks for all the Zoe kids in their region. This initial contract led to schools and clinics asking them to sew for them. With their profits they purchased newer sewing machines to improve productivity. They are now recognized business leader in their community and have started training other Zoe participants.

### **Food Security**

Before joining Zoe, the youth worked in other people’s farms to get food and generally survived on one meal per day. Their meals were not nutritionally balanced and many times they were hungry. After training and receiving seeds and fertilizer from Zoe, the households planted vegetable gardens and crops of maize and beans. Zoe provided small livestock to six families in the first year who needed the extra help. All others have purchased their own or used group fund resources. At time of graduation all youth were keeping small livestock and some

have fishponds. The children are now eating healthy meals with protein, are food secure, and no longer have to beg or labor for food.

### **Health & Hygiene**

After the training on personal and environmental hygiene, the group members received hygiene kits (soap, towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and laundry soap). Zoe also provided material for the sewing of face masks in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. All families can now afford to access basic medical care when they fall sick. During the three years, Zoe provided financial help to three members of the group the who need special or expensive medical assistance.

### **Education**

Since joining Zoe, 34 children are now able to pay their own school fees from the profits of their income generating projects and so are attending school regularly. Zoe initially paid school fees and for school stationery for seven of these siblings. Two girls who are heads of household could not access their ordinary level exam results because they had not paid their school fees. Once they started projects with Zoe they managed to access their results and currently they are doing their advanced level.

### **Housing**

Zoe constructed a two-bedroom house for Florence and her siblings. The family of five children and a grandfather used to sleep all together in a round hut. Zoe provided all the building materials and the group members did labor of fetching water and carrying sand and bricks to the house. Zoe also bought windowpanes and a door for Tafara to repair his house. With their own profits, 11 other families repaired the roofs and floors of their houses.

Zoe provided cement and roofing sheets for five households to construct toilets. Using their own savings, seven members repaired their toilets.

### **Spiritual Strengthening**

Before Zoe, the children thought God did not answer the prayers of those in need. Some could hardly perceive the presence and love of God because they were always suffering. They had no motivation to go to church. Through Zoe, they experienced God's answer to their cries and they realized that God can use other people to help those who are in need. The members have their own church denomination, but as a group they have developed a spirit of brotherhood and they always pray whenever they meet. Cathrine is their group pastor and leads all devotions.



## FIRST YEAR CASE STUDY

**Head of Household:** Simon (18)

**Dependents:** Sister- Ever (11)

Brothers- Peter (10), Arnold (15), Solomon (20)

**Challenges:** Simon's mother died in 2012 due to a short illness, a year or two after his father had passed. The grandfather felt responsible for the children and took them in but he did not have the capacity to provide for them. In 2013, Simon dropped out of school unable to pay the fees. He began laboring in banana plantations to earn income to provide for his family. *"Dropping out of school and starting to assume the adult role of working for my siblings and grandfather is the hardest decision I have made but I had no option."* The family faced shortages of food, clothing and other basic needs which caused fights, especially during mealtime when there was never enough food to satisfy everyone. Simon recalls how hard life was. *"I had lost hope in my life. If it wasn't for Zoe, my siblings were going to drop out of school like I did. Eventually we were going to lose our farm to others for failing to fully utilize it."* All of this changed after the family joined Zoe in March 2019.



Simon (left) and Peter

**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 Simon's most recent responses to the Dream questions:

- What makes you feel sad? *Death of my father who was the breadwinner*
- What makes you happy? *Playing football and playing music*
- What happens that you do not like? *Being overworked and underpaid. Thieves who steal bananas.*
- What is your dream for the future? *To build a big house and take good care of my siblings and grandfather*
- What will be your guiding principles to achieve your dream? *Work hard and be obedient and prayerful*

### Family Specific Achievements

**Income Generation:** After Simon received entrepreneurship training, he wrote a business plan and presented it to his group for approval. He received a grant of US\$150 and decided to revive his grandfather's banana plantation which had been poorly maintained and managed over the years and did not produce any yield. His community is agricultural based and many people specialize in banana farming. Simon received training on conservation methods of farming and a specialized training on banana farming and management. An Agriculture Extension Officer visited his farm and



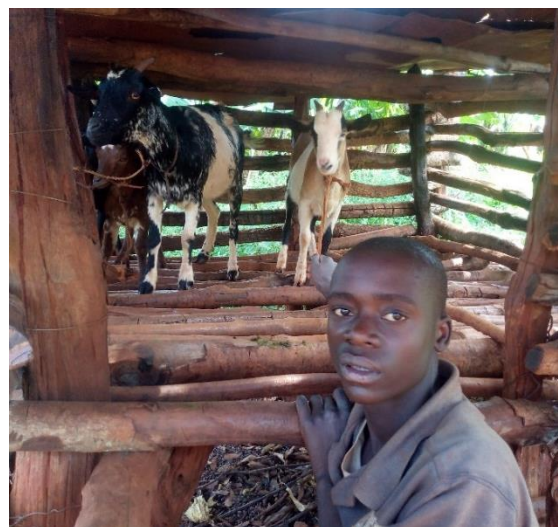
Simon preparing the bananas for the market



recommended pesticides and fertilizers which Simon purchased. Through mutual help activities, his groupmates helped him weed, mulch, prune and fertilize his banana plantation. Five months later, he started harvesting bananas that he sells to buyers from Harare at \$0.50/kg. He harvests an average of 400kg/month, earning around \$200. Sometimes he harvests nearly 600kg of bananas.



*Peter helping with the chickens that are sold for \$6 each*



*Simon with the goats he breeds*

With his profits, Simon reintegrated his brother Arnold into school. He also bought goats and chickens with his savings to breed. Currently, he has 5 goats and 33 chickens. Simon said, *"I never thought our banana plantation was going to be resuscitated and bring income to the family. Thank you Zoe for the resources and ideas as well as encouragement as we had lost hope in it as a family. I promise to work hard and pay school fees for my siblings and take care of my grandfather."*



*Simon feeding his chickens and his dish drying rack to the side*

**Agricultural Projects and Food Security:** Before Zoe, Simon's family often spent the whole day with empty stomachs. Simon and his group received agricultural training through Zoe to equip them with knowledge and skills to improve food production and become food secure. They learned methods of conservation farming to ensure maximum yields, post-harvest crop storage, climate-smart agriculture, and maize production. In October 2019, each family received 10kg certified maize seed, 50kg fertilizer, garden seeds, tools and knapsacks to prepare their fields. They expect a good harvest of approximately one ton of maize as their area did not incur the dry spells that affected most regions in Zimbabwe. The family has a nutrition garden growing vegetables for consumption and his chickens provide eggs and meat for the family. Simon's family now affords three meals a day.

**Health:** Initially, a visit to his home by Zoe staff indicated serious health issues due to lack of cleanliness. Simon attended training on disease prevention and personal, environmental, and food hygiene. Following the trainings, he implemented good hygiene practices at his home and constructed a plate drying rack and dug a compost pit. His surroundings are now generally clean and his family's person hygiene has improved significantly.

**Housing:** The family has an adequate place to sleep and a proper latrine. Their latrine was constructed in 2011 by Ministry of Health Outreach Program that was brought in when the community had a cholera outbreak. Simon plans to build a new kitchen for his grandfather as their previous kitchen is now old.

**Education:** Simon dropped out from school at the age of 13 after completing his primary level because he had no way to pay school fees. His brother Arnold dropped out in 2017 when he completed his primary level. Upon enrollment, Zoe supported Arnold with school fees and he began his secondary education. Simon's other siblings, Ever and Peter, were still in school but did not attend regularly. Through support from Zoe with scholastic materials, all three now regularly attend class and are doing well in school.

**Child Rights and Community Connections:** Training on child rights was conducted to equip all group members with knowledge on their rights and responsibilities as well as proper procedures to report cases of abuse. Simon and his siblings did not have birth certificates so Zoe staff facilitated for them to acquire birth certificates and Simon also attained a national Identity card.

**Spiritual Strengthening:** Simon's family members are Christian attend the Apostolic Church. They see Zoe coming into their lives as an answer to their prayers to move out of poverty and become self-sufficient.

**Prayer Requests:** For his family to remain in good health and for continued work success for his family

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

**Group Income Projects and Activities:** Aspiration Empowerment Group started a group nutrition garden, mainly as a learning space. This project enhances group cohesion and provides nutritious vegetables for members to use as relish at their homes. The group plans to further invest in horticulture and grow green peas, onions, tomatoes, carrots, and cucumbers as winter passes. The group also participates in mutual help activities at each other's homes. Simon receives social support and friendship from his group members during their group sessions.

**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 outsiders 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 orphans 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.

Some 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.***



## Aspiration Group, Zimbabwe

At graduation 32 households and a total of 109 children (red left, green joined)



### Simon (m) 17

Peter (m) 9  
Ever (f) 10  
Arnold (m) 14  
**Solomon (m) 19**

### Brandon (m) 19

Belove (m) 2

### Brandon (m) 21

Harmony (m) 5  
Hazel (f) 4

### Johan (m) 17

Phanuel (m) 15  
Evelyn (f) 12  
Precious (f) 10  
Rosemary (f) 9  
Mavis (f) 8  
Tawananyasha (f) 1

### Owen (m) 20

**Tinashe (m) 17**  
Nancy (m) 15  
Martin (m) 13

### Pardon (m) 18

Caleb (m) 17

### Colleta (f) 14

Eliza (f) 10  
**Violet (f) 9**  
**Zacharia (m) 1**  
Rejoice (f) 4  
**Ruwarashe (f) 2**

### Antony (m) 21

Kupakwashe (f) 4  
Anashe (f) 2

### Florence (f) 14

**Chipo (f) 13**  
Steven (m) 10  
Rejoice (f) 7  
Maxwell (m) 3

### Josephine (f) 14

Mufaro (f) 10  
Munashe (f) 3

### Ronald (m) 18

**Promise (m) 20**  
Cliton (m) 13  
Clever (m) 8

### Tafara (m) 14

Nokutenda (m) 8

### Enoch (m) 19

Melody (f) 3

### Melinda (f) 15

Ammon (m) 14  
Cecelia (f) 11  
Tinofara (m) 5  
Takudzwa (m) 4  
Tawananyasha (f) 1

### Polite (f) 15

Performance (f) 12  
Purity (f) 10  
Praise (f) 6  
Blesward (m) 4  
Livonia (f) 1

### Amos (m) 15

Nokutenda (f) 8  
Tanyaradzwa (m) 2

### Kudzanai (m) 16

**James (m) 11**  
**Melisa (f) 11**

### Cathrine (f) 16

Jacob (m) 14  
Judah (m) 10  
Daniel (m) 5

### Luckymore (m) 18

Lovemore (m) 15  
Eva (f) 11

### Tanaka (f) 17

Takunda (m) 8  
Takudzwa (m) 13

### Takudzwa (m) 15

Alisha (f) 5  
**Lameck (m) 21**

### Ishmael (m) 14

Innocent (m) 11  
Praise (f) 8  
Tanaka (m) 2

### Takunda (m) 15

Tryness (f) 2  
Shingirai (m) 18

### Daniel (m) 21

Trish (f) 12  
Joyline (f) 12  
Energy (m) 16  
Trinity (f) 4

### Marvelous (f) 19

Bright (m) 16  
Memory (f) 13  
**Tadiwa (f) 9**

### Locadia (f) 14

Rumbidzai (f) 18

### Ronica (f) 16

Samia (f) 12  
Laston (m) 14  
Tendai (m) 7

### Noline (f) 14

Clinton (m) 10  
Tinotenda (m) 6

### Tafadzwa (m) 17

Lovemore (m) 9

### Munashe (m) 17

Blessing (m) 13  
**Phillip (m) 14**

### Newman (m) 17

Magret (f) 10  
Lengton (m) 14

### Tadiwa (f) 14

Diva (m) 11  
Ignetious (m) 7  
Makanaka (m) 5  
Kundai (f) 18

**The following is an overview of how Zoe empowers orphans 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 orphans 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 orphans 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. Because of the associated stigma, they are usually reluctant to discuss their status and sometimes even avoid treatment. Zoe provides supportive opportunities for children to be tested, helps them access medications, and educates to counter the many misconceptions held in the community.

After youth achieve basic health and hygiene standards in their homes, Zoe provides the first distribution of items like mosquito nets, sleeping mats, blankets, and hygiene products. Zoe helps families enroll in health insurance plans and/or access medical care by providing assistance. For continued self-care, the youth learn to budget their own money for insurance, emergencies, and health related products. In Zimbabwe, insurance is quite expensive so the families are encouraged to have resources set aside to address medical issues.

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 orphans 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 some programs, Zoe is able to provide basic construction materials like roofing materials or windows. Usually, the youth save money to improve their housing and their groupmates provide labor assistance as needed.

## **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.