

# African S.M.I.L.E.



## Joining Hands and Hearts to Help the People of Singida, Tanzania

by Don Etzel

Picture yourself standing in an open room—literally four walls with no floor and no ceiling—with rain pouring down. You're surrounded by a congregation several hundred strong, singing and praising God for more than three hours. There's no pause for the weather, no concern that it is too crowded—just God's presence and strength to refresh and renew you for the challenging week ahead. Those challenges, however, aren't as simple as coordinating family schedules or dealing with issues at work. Instead, they include frequent drought, malaria, typhoid, AIDS and even leprosy.

This was the scene for me during my first trip in 2004 to Nkungi Village, an area of 5,000 people in the Singida Region of Tanzania, Africa. Our small group from St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Oregon, was led by Rev. Robert Ward, a veteran missionary of nearly 40 years.

Denny Loftstom, a former mission doctor, had asked Pastor Ward to visit and help rebuild the Iambi Lutheran Hospital. Originally a leprosarium, the local people of the village would often avoid the hospital because of leprosy's lasting stigma. In a world where this horrible disease has largely been eradicated, the disease is still present here because of the lack of consistent medication, local care and education. It impacts not only the leper colony, but their families as well—preventing children and grandchildren from attending school. Helping repair and expand the hospital meant addressing this and the other afflictions of the village.

In addition to food and medication and some initial building, that first trip cemented in our group the need to do more. This is most certainly true, when "more" means so little to us and

so much to the people of Iambi and the surrounding Nkungi village. From building and improving worship facilities to expanding the educational foundation of the community and providing life-giving medical infrastructure, there is much to do.

Following a return trip in 2005—where the group helped build classrooms for a new nursing school at Iambi hospital, bringing much needed education and more medical services—we formalized our efforts under **African SMILE** (Singida Medical Improvements & Learning Environments). Under this banner and with God's blessings, African SMILE and our volunteers—through our words, work and witness—have been able to join with Christian families across the nation to bring healing, hope and Christ's message of salvation.

The mission has not been easy. As a small not-for-profit with 100% of funds going to the people of Iambi, we are an all-

volunteer organization. Through generous contributions of time, talents and testimony, we have sent over 18 groups to the region, giving African SMILE a local presence nearly three months out of the year, building, sharing and growing together in service and witness.

Even those back at home have made significant efforts to help, including the founding of a school library—complete with computers—brought about by the generous donations of the children of Community of Hope Lutheran, in Wilsonville, Oregon.

When we're not on the ground, we work to establish sustainable local practices by hiring local workers to continue projects and advance the local economy.

As we begin this new year, we are blessed to see God's hand continue to help the people of Iambi. Through gifts of service and support, we have seen the church there and in the surrounding region grow tremendously.

In less than eight years of active work, the hospital facilities have expanded with an infectious diseases ward now able to treat and care for the growing AIDS epidemic.



New classrooms and dormitories are complete, enabling the start of a Nursing Training School at Iambi. Students and teachers can safely stay there and study, bringing benefit to the community and their families. School children—including the once-ostracized children of lepers—are enrolled in the primary and new secondary school and are benefitting from the new classrooms and new educational materials.

A beautiful new chapel has been built in the center of the hospital compound. Also, churches in the outlying areas have been built or remodeled.

The harvest—of both growth and possibility—is definitely plentiful in and around Iambi. While the workers are increasing, there is more to do. With continued medication, education and inexpensive independent living facilities, we can see the eradication of leprosy at Iambi in the next decade. Helping women and children learn in a safe, nurturing environment through further expanding the primary and secondary facilities will have a lasting impact on the vibrancy and health of the overall community.

For more information on the work and mission of African SMILE, please visit our website:  
[www.africansmile.org](http://www.africansmile.org)

## STOP LEPROSY CHANGE A LIFE


**\$50 a month can change the future  
for the people of Nkungi**

Your year commitment builds a house for a leper, starting them on the road to recovery and helping their family move back into society. Please help today.



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### Don Etzel

is a businessman and volunteer for community outreach efforts. He and his wife, Linda, have fostered many children, and serve on the board of African Smile. They are members of Community of Hope Lutheran in Wilsonville, OR.



Below:  
Pastor Gary Blumenthal  
baptizing at the village church



Above: Giving cotton bandages to the lepers of Nkungi

Below: Dara Etzel and Don Etzel visiting with local villagers



Above and right:  
Laying the foundation and making concrete blocks for the Infectious Ward Building at Iambi Hospital



Below right:  
Lepers' children, tutored by volunteers, are given school uniforms when they pass exams and are allowed to go for additional schooling

Photos courtesy of Roger Bighouse

Young herdsman from the Nkungi village