Zimbabwe is a country in Southern Africa with a population of roughly 11.5 million people. When their independence was gained from Britain in 1980, they had an inflation rate of 7 percent and exported a large amount of crops.

In the 1990s, the completion rate of O-level examinations, nearly equivalent to our high school diplomas, was at 72 percent. In October of 2008, those rates had dropped to a mere 11 percent. Teachers do not come to work not because they are on strike or have given up, but because they simply can’t afford to travel from their home to the school. Many couldn’t even afford food, as the price of one egg 6 months prior was 50 billion dollars. At the bank’s official exchange rate, teachers made roughly $100 USD per month. In reality, the actual in-country exchange rate was determined to be $1,220,000,000 ZWD to $1 USD. It was at this point that the education system effectively collapsed. Towards the end of 2008, inflation in Zimbabwe was reported to be at 89.7 sextillion percent annually, translating into prices doubling every 24.7 hours. This country, once the breadbasket for Southern Africa, now struggles to maintain what little they hold on to. Starting in January of 2009, the country has essentially stopped production of Zimbabwean dollars in favor of foreign currency. The government has declared that the local currency be suspended until the country’s industrial output has reached 60 percent. In April of 2009, it was at an average of 20 percent.

Since 1990, infant mortality rates have doubled and the life expectancy for women has dropped to 30 years old, both largely due to the AIDS epidemic. By 1997, 29 percent of the population was infected with HIV. There is a hope, though, as in 2007 those numbers were said to have decreased to around 15 percent. Between the years of 2002 and 2006, though, even before the inflation rose so rapidly, the population is speculated to have decreased by four million. This means that many of the children that might have been able to be enrolled in schools to help sustain the education system simply didn’t survive that long. With the highest proportion of orphans in the world, many children simply don’t have the means to survive and afford school, as 12 and 13 year old children are forced into raising their younger brothers and sisters as a result of their parents’ deaths. The condition of the health system is partially to blame, as many of the hospitals and clinics don’t receive steady electricity much less clean water.
With conditions such as these, one would typically expect a visit there to be depressing and saddening. What is seen upon arrival, though, is quite the opposite. Greeted with singing and skits, one’s heart is immediately filled with love. The smiles upon each person’s face cannot be matched. This collection of photographs is meant to convey that feeling – showing that faced with empty schools and hunger, the Zimbabwean people still love, and laugh, and hope . . .

The photographs were taken on trips to Zimbabwe in 2006 and 2007 through JourneyPartners, a non-profit organization based out of Franklinton, NC. JourneyPartners focuses on three areas: clean and available water, education, and resources. Since the first team was led in 1995, there have been seven major projects including construction of a 75,000 liter water tank for the Baptist Conference Center in Gweru and surrounding villages, construction of the House of Hope, a community-driven hostel for AIDS orphans in Masembura, and installation of sustainable water purification systems in remote villages and high-density townships. In addition to construction projects, JourneyPartners has taken medical supplies to the rural and urban clinics on nearly every trip. On one trip in particular, a container was sent with over $125,000 worth of medical supplies. Carried on that same container was school supplies, medical textbooks, and hygiene supplies, as well as children’s clothing for the House of Hope. Since its start in Zimbabwe, JourneyPartners has begun to expand and are currently working with communities in Montana and Brazil, as well.

There are many ways that you can make a difference in one, or many lives. You can participate in something as simple as a penpal effort, writing letters to children or families in Zimbabwe. Or you can aim to do a little more, helping to assemble school kits and birthing kits. If instead, you would like to make a monetary contribution, the means to do so, as well as the description of birthing and school kits, is described on the website under “How You Can Help Us.” Even the smallest act, if done with compassion, can change a life forever.

JourneyPartners is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and can be found on the web at www.journeypartners.net

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