

REPORT FROM  
**ERITREA**  
 2008

**How your contributions were used**  
 ERRA-BC ACCUMULATED REVENUES & EXPENSES  
 SINCE OUR ESTABLISHMENT IN 1992 (\$C)

	2007	1992-2007
<b>REVENUE</b>		
Fundraisers	6,875.50	66,930.65
Charitable donations	47,247.64	497,484.96
Charitable bequests	114,254.52	188,139.71
Gifts from organizations	14,466.10	103,772.16
Interest/other	5,870.67	51,307.98
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>188,714.43</b>	<b>907,635.46</b>
<b>EXPENDITURES AND COMMITMENTS</b>		
One Family orphans	5,847.45	201,278.83
St. Joseph's/Shinara Schools	4,000.00	44,839.19
Hagaz Agro-Tech School	-----	30,419.60
Faraleba School	-----	39,025.75
Water development	398.18	27,392.46
Development investment fund	139,126.14	340,799.89
Afabet Comboni Community	8,000.00	47,388.30
Kindergartens	8,500.00	31,261.03
Poor families/refugees/women	1,980.00	54,703.35
Feledarb/Bimbilna clinics	11,000.00	18,500.00
Study centres/Students	9,600.00	31,316.35
Public orphanages/schools	-----	8,711.58
Wounded war veterans	-----	5,449.50
Container shipments	-----	18,323.50
Promotions/Administration	262.66	8,226.13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>188,714.43</b>	<b>907,635.46</b>



**JOIN THE FAMILY!**

*If you would like to support the good work being done in Eritrea,  
 write a cheque for any amount to:*

**ERRA-BC**  
**PO Box 20004**  
**Sidney, BC V8L5C9**  
*Your donation is tax deductible.*

**Africa's unsung heroines:  
 the nursing Sisters**

## Lingering images of suffering and hope

SINCE I began visiting Eritrea in 1992, I return home from each trip with certain impressions that stand out in my mind. In 2007 I again came away with many impressions. Two of them remain very strong.

My friend Ghirmai Tekie works in the education department of the Catholic Eparchy of Keren. His 5-year-old daughter Mequet suffered from anemia and perhaps other conditions. She had been slow to begin walking and talking and she slept a great deal of the time.

When I visited Ghirmai's office in November, I told him I was looking forward to seeing Mequet. He looked at me sadly and said, "She passed away exactly one month ago today."

Apparently, Mequet was taken to Keren Hospital for a blood transfusion. The blood was tainted, most likely with hepatitis. Her liver failed and she died a few months later--a needless death that left the whole family heartbroken.

I left Ghirmai feeling sorrow for a child I never met, and regret that I hadn't been able to help my friend.

Another image is of a small child sitting on a sidewalk in Asmara. Beside the child was what appeared to be a bundle of rags. In fact the child's mother was lying there, apparently too weak to even beg for help. Perhaps by now the mother is dead. The child may also be dead or in an orphanage.

In Eritrea, death is always close for many people. That makes life all

the more precious. It may explain the odd paradox of people in apparently miserable circumstances living with great joy. Like my old friend Archie used to say every day after he got a pacemaker for his ailing heart: "Ain't life grand!"

Health care resources are limited and inadequate in much of Eritrea. But another impression I have and cherish is of the religious Sisters working tirelessly in little clinics in remote villages, extending lives and bringing some joy and "grandness", particularly for mothers and children who would otherwise be doomed to premature deaths. Two of those wonderful Sisters are Pasqualina and Angelica. See page 4 for more about them. ♦

*Dennis Schroeder*

**COVER PICTURE: A young child receives a medical checkup from Sister Pasqualina (left) at the Capuchin clinic in Feledareb. This child and its mother (right) still have hope.**



MODERN Eritrea was born in the 1890s as an Italian colony. The Italians attempted to invade Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) from there in 1896, but were defeated. However, the Italian dictator Mussolini got revenge in 1935, invading Ethiopia and forcing Emperor Haile Selassie to flee. In 1941, Italy was defeated by the Allies. Haile Selassie was restored to power in Ethiopia and Eritrea became a United Nations mandate administered by Britain.

In 1952, the UN federated Eritrea with Ethiopia, a move that was very unpopular with most Eritreans. In 1962, Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea, ending the federation. Meanwhile the Eritreans had launched an armed liberation struggle that lasted for the next 30 years.

Eritrea won its freedom in 1991 and, after a UN supervised referendum, declared independence on May 24, 1993.

For several years after indepen-

dence, conditions improved in Eritrea. Schools, hospitals, clinics, roads and homes were built, and agricultural and industrial production increased. The economy grew by an average of 6-7% per year.

But by 1997, relations with Ethiopia were deteriorating for a variety of reasons. A vicious border war broke out in May 1998 and lasted for two years. Up to 100,000 people died and more than a million were displaced. Since December 2000 UN peacekeepers have patrolled a 25-km wide buffer zone between the countries. But none of the issues that caused the war have been resolved and the level of tension remains high.

The Eritrean economy has been in decline since the border war. Most young people are still in the armed forces or doing compulsory national service. Drought and diseases constantly stalk people still not recovered from the war. ♦



### ERITREA AT A GLANCE

**Location:** Northeastern Africa.  
**Boundaries:** Red Sea to the east, Sudan to the northwest, Ethiopia to the south, Djibouti to the southeast.  
**Total land area:** 124,320 sq. km., about the size of England.  
**Coastline:** 1,094 km. along Red Sea.  
**Population:** About 3.2 million, 75% in rural areas. Many others abroad.  
**Religions:** Most Orthodox Christian or Muslim. Some Catholics, Protestants, animists.  
**Languages:** Tigrinya, Tigre (80%), and 7 other minorities.

### Santa Anna School

ERRA-BC has a long association with Santa Anna School in Keren, dating back to 1996 when Stephanie Schroeder worked there as a volunteer in the kindergarten.

Now we are expanding our program of supporting students from the poorest families by paying their school fees for them.

Sister Leteberhan is the headmaster of this school, which has more than 800 students, 550 in elementary grades 1-5 and 300 in kindergarten. The school is in the process of adding junior secondary grades as well.

There are also 24 orphan girls living in the school compound, of whom 16 are students at the school.

We continue to support students at two other Keren area schools: St. Joseph's School and Shinara School, both operated by the de la Salle brothers. ◆

### Sr Leteberhan with Lidia, 10, who excels despite physical handicaps.



### Dekemhare kindergarten

IN Dekemhare, a town 45 km south of Asmara, the Daughters of Charity recently opened a beautiful new kindergarten and school complex. The school has some 1,300 students in elementary and junior secondary grades.

The kindergarten is also large, with 6 classrooms and up to 60 children in each room. There is also a beautiful playground area. The kindergarten offers a 2-year program for 4-5 year olds, and has 8 teachers and assistants, headed by Sister Almaz.

Sister Lettemariam, the superior of the Daughters of Charity in Dekemhare, is one of Eritrea's best in organizing and operating kindergartens. In 2006, she and Stephanie worked together to set up the classroom environments at the new centre.

We continue to support the kindergarten with the provision of furniture and equipment. We also provide support for destitute families in Dekemhare. ◆

### Dekemhare school takes students from the poorest families.



## Who we are; what we are trying to do

IT all started in 1992, when we, Stephanie and Dennis Schroeder, left our comfortable home and three young daughters in Sidney, BC to visit Eritrea, a land devastated by three decades of war and frequent droughts. Fighting had ended but rebuilding had not yet begun.

Our initial search was for a small orphanage where we could sponsor all of the children. We found it at St. Joseph's School in Keren. We also found Canadians who shared our interest in developing friendships with Eritreans and assisting them in their struggle to create better lives for themselves and their children.

To make it easier to transfer donated funds and goods, and to work with groups in Eritrea, we joined a small group to create a B.C. branch of the Eritrean Relief Association in Canada in 1992. Two



The Arbutus Singers at an Eritrean fundraiser in Sidney.

years later, after Eritrea had become independent, that organization was dissolved. We reorganized as the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Association of British Columbia (ERRA-BC), a non-profit society incorporated in B.C. and registered with the Canada Revenue Agency as a charitable organization.

During our 16 years of operation, we have spent or committed more than \$900,000 (see back page) to a variety of projects in Eritrea and have sent two large shipping containers. The projects and groups we presently support are described in this booklet.

Donations and support have come from hundreds of people in B.C., as well as from elsewhere in Canada and the U.S. Church and school groups, service clubs and businesses have assisted.

We continue to visit Eritrea each year to strengthen our ties of friendship, to work as volunteers and to observe the programs and projects we are supporting.

Some of our Eritrean contacts have also had the opportunity to visit us while they were in North America. ◆

### **ERRA-BC**

#### **Board of Directors**

Ghebremedhin Abbai

*(President)*

Gary Koett

Lynn Koett

Patricia Gale-MacDonald

Dennis Schroeder

*(Secretary-Treasurer)*

Stephanie Schroeder

Peter Yearwood

#### **Active Volunteers**

*Dozens*

#### **Contributors**

*Hundreds*

## Rural clinics are a lifeline for the poorest

THE rural health station at Feledareb, about 12 km northeast of Keren, is run by the Capuchin Sisters. Meant to serve 11 villages in the immediate vicinity, it is more like a small hospital that attracts people from much farther away.

The area is dry; crop failures are common; and malnourishment rates are high.

Our long-time friend, Sister Pasqualina, the original "house-mother" for the One Family orphans in Keren, is a nurse at the clinic. ERRA-BC is helping her with little initiatives she is taking. One is to provide food, medications and beds for mothers who bring their children to the clinic but can't afford to stay there with them.

### A child from a nearby village is weighed at the Feledareb clinic.



**Sister Angelica with pictures from her clinic at Bimbilna.**

Sister Angelica, formerly at Feledareb, is now the head of a small clinic at Bimbilna in western Eritrea near the Ethiopian border.

If anything, living conditions there are even worse than at Feledareb. There are many displaced people, including the Kunama ethnic group, from the UN patrolled border zone.

Women traditionally give birth at home there. Because of malnourishment and complications, maternal and infant death rates are very high.

With help from ERRA-BC, Angelica hopes to convince more women to give birth at the clinic, giving mothers and babies both a better chance of surviving. ♦

## The "desert dynamo" is still full of zest

AFTER some 40 years in Eritrea, a heart attack and back surgery, Sister Thomas of the Comboni order has lost neither her thick Glasgow accent nor her zest for life.

The diminutive human dynamo has lived in Afabet, a predominantly Muslim town of about 35,000 people in the arid Sahel region, for about a decade and wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Foreign visitors have not been permitted to travel to Afabet for several years, so if we want to see Tommy, she must come to Keren or Asmara. Because of petrol rationing, that is not easy.

So it was with great pleasure that we met again this year and got updated on the work of the Sisters in Afabet.

There are normally four Comboni Sisters running a kindergarten, doing women's promotion and operating the multi-purpose learning centre. In 2007, Tommy was virtually on her own for a while as two Sisters were transferred elsewhere in Eritrea and Sister Agnezi visited her home in Italy. Now two younger Sisters have been assigned to Afabet.

The women's garden plot project, begun last year, suffered a setback when goats got into the compound and ate all the produce.

Tommy has an idea for a new project though. Poor women are being taught to crochet and will be paid for quilts that will be given to poor families. ERRA-BC happily continues to support her work. ♦

### Brother Ghebreyesus and Sister Thomas take a break on the trip from Asmara to Keren.



## This is a time for soul searching

THE Eritrean population is divided about evenly between Muslims and Christians. In general the various religious groups have lived together in harmony for a long time.

However the government has cracked down on religions, particularly fundamentalist Muslim and Christian groups, arresting adherents and forbidding meetings. Four groups are officially sanctioned: Muslims, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and Evangelical Lutherans.

Muslims and Orthodox (Coptic Christians) together make up more than 90% of the country's population and have been the predominant religions in the Horn of Africa for much more than a millennium.

The relatively small Catholic Church was introduced when the Italians created their Eritrean colony in the 1890s. For the most part it has had good relations with the government, many of whose leaders were educated in Catholic schools.

Recently the relationship has become more tense. The government is requiring priests to do military service. Foreign "missionaries" are having their resident's permits revoked. In the early 1990s, the church's social activities were restricted to education and health care.

In 1997 there was a government directive that all church-operated schools, clinics, orphanages, etc. be turned over to the government.



**Bishop Kidane is head of the Catholic Eparchy of Keren.**

That directive was shelved when the border war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998.

Now it is back again. In 2007, all religious schools and clinics were told to prepare inventories of all their physical assets.

According to Bishop Kidane of Keren, one of three Eritrean bishops, the Catholic Church is objecting, claiming it is an Eritrean institution, run by Eritreans, providing highly valued and needed services to the people, and scrupulously obeying all laws in the country.

At the same time, Kidane says, this is a time for the church to do a lot of soul searching. Perhaps the land, the buildings, the machinery and equipment aren't absolutely necessary for the church and religious orders to fulfil their core mission of helping people in need.

To date, we have no news of confiscations or takeovers. ♦

## Underground dam completed at Hagaz

AFTER years of detailed planning, negotiating, fundraising and preparation, the underground dam at Hagaz was completed in 2007.

The dam was the brainchild of Brother Amilcare, who was also instrumental in creating Hagaz Agro-Technical School. Because of his expulsion from Eritrea in 2005, he was unfortunately not able to see the completion of the project.

The dam, across the Boggu River at the southern boundary of the school property, is expected to create an underground aquifer replenished by water filtering

**A temporary concrete marker is the only visible evidence of the new underground dam at Hagaz.**



**Workers at Hagaz relocate waste water facilities.**

through the sand during rainy seasons and provide a reliable water supply, not only for the school but also for some 20,000 people in and around the town of Hagaz.

Early indications are that it will meet expectations. The depth to water in riverbed wells was 14 metres in July around the time construction began. In November, after completion, it had risen to 12 metres.

The dam was built using the jet grout system. Cement was injected at high pressure into 2 parallel connected rows of boreholes stretching 80 metres across the riverbed and going as far down as 27 metres into bedrock.

The dambuilding machinery, purchased from Italy, remains at Hagaz School. Brother Tinsiew, who has replaced Amilcare as project manager at the school, is hopeful that a second dam can be built upstream at Faraleba. But future projects may depend on the situation described on page 8. ERRA-BC is prepared to finance the project if it is approved. ♦

## In spirit they still remain together

MOST of them began life in primitive children's camps in the Sahel region near the Sudan border in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were orphans and children who were separated from parents during Eritrea's 30-year struggle for independence from Ethiopia.

At the end of the war in the early 1990s, they were placed in orphanages in liberated cities and towns farther south.

The de la Salle Brothers took in about 100 of these children at St. Joseph's School in Keren. Some left, but the 81 who remained bonded strongly and called themselves *Hanti Sidra* (Tigrinya for One Family). The Schroeders, who lived and worked at St. Joseph's School in 1996-97, and all those who helped

support the orphans, became part of their extended family.

Since then, family members have scattered across the country. Students completed school--12 graduated from university. Some married and had children.

As One Family grew older, ERRA-BC no longer paid for school fees, food, clothing and boarding. We began a revolving loan fund to help them start small businesses. About 30 took advantage of this fund. Some were not successful, but others did extremely well. Selemawit and her husband started 3 businesses--a convenience store, a concrete block operation and a bus. Others rented wedding dresses and canopies, sold clothing, food, and electronics, operated bars, raised

**Some members of One Family gather for dinner in Asmara.**



**Aster lives near the North Sea coast of Germany.**

sheep, farmed, and more.

Living conditions, let alone prospects for businesses are very difficult in Eritrea now. Young people are expected to remain in national or military service indefinitely. Their ability to move about freely is severely restricted. The border war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000 dealt a severe blow to the Eritrean economy and people, and it has not recovered. The threat of renewed war constantly looms.

As a result of these pressures, many young people who grew up as proud and patriotic Eritreans, and fought willingly in the border war, sadly no longer see a future for themselves in Eritrea. A growing number are leaving the country at great personal risk. Many have died or been arrested, but the exodus continues.

Our One Family is just a microcosm of the larger society. To our knowledge, 12 have so far left

the country. Three are in a UNHCR camp in Ethiopia, a couple are in Sudan, one is in Dubai, several are in Europe, and three are in the U.S.

Those who have left have not abandoned Eritrea or One Family. Aster, the first to leave 10 years ago, is married and has three children in Germany. She has returned to visit Eritrea and is at the hub of an international One Family network that keeps in touch by phone and email. Others in the diaspora regularly communicate with each other and send money back home.

ERRA-BC has never encouraged anyone to leave Eritrea but we recognize the difficulties young Eritreans face. We have been supporting our three members in the UNHCR camp and trying to stay in touch with as many others as possible. And dreaming that one day there might again be a reunion of all members of One Family. ♦

**Awet arrived in Atlanta in 2007.**

