

REPORT FROM
ERITREA
2006-2007



**Eritrean women and children:
smiling through the tears**

You are making a difference in many lives

AT the end of November 2006, I returned from a 3 week visit to Eritrea, northeast Africa. I know that if you are reading this missive you are connected with many people in Eritrea by moral, financial and prayer support. In other words you have entered into a give and take relationship recognizing that you have much to learn and much to share. You are making a difference in many lives half a

world away. Our friends in Eritrea are working tirelessly to make their little corner of the world a better place. You are enriched by learning about and sharing the load with these good people.

I will attempt to give you a little update on our friends and their work. Hopefully you will hear their laughter, share their hopes, shed a tear with them and resolve with them to carry on.

The plight of Eritrean women and children

In Eritrea, I was struck by the number of women who are essentially alone--responsible for raising their children, taking care of their little houses and often trying to add to the meagre family income. Their husbands are absent.

This is a difficult time. Many of the men--husbands and fathers aged 20 to 40 years--are away from home doing compulsory military service. They get a salary of approximately \$50-100 Canadian a month. They bring home their money to their families and spend time with them whenever they get leave from service. In the meantime the women are struggling under the financial and work strain, and the emotional stress is beginning to show.

The children are also feeling bereft of their fathers. They are missing the security, discipline and guidance of the man in the family. This crisis of family is most felt in



the villages where the women have the added burden of eaking a living out of the soil. This is not their traditional role and it is adding more stress to family life.

What can be done in this critical time when there is no end in sight for these social problems? ERRA-BC is supporting our Eritrean friends, the religious women's congregations that are providing education and practical assistance to women and children. Read more on the following pages. ◆

Stephanie Schroeder

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



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 15 years of operation, we have contributed more than \$700,000 (see back page) to projects in Eritrea and have sent two large shipping containers. The projects and groups we 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 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. ♦

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Helping our own little "bootstrap bank"

WE have been "family" to 81 Eritrean orphans (one or both parents died) since 1993. We began by supporting their education and living expenses. Now they are young men and women (many 25 to 27 years) and they are starting families of their own. Mihret has 1 year old twin boys!

We have created a micro-credit lending system--a miniature version of the Nobel Prize winning Grameen Bank. We have a small, member committee that listens to the ideas of members who wish to borrow up to 10,000 nakfa (about \$800 Canadian). The idea must be thought out, including how they propose to pay it back.

In November I met with our One Family members who live in or near Asmara (the capital city), Thirty have already taken loans and paid them back in full; others are struggling to get their small



Awet and two other members of One Family run a profitable bar.

businesses on their feet. Several were waiting for funds to start their dreams. Small shops, rental of wedding clothes, and livestock sales were some of the most prevalent ideas. It's inspiring to hear these young people full of enthusiasm and hope, eager to start a business, in a flat economy, with so many barriers. ♦

Our now grown up orphans joined Stephanie for a "family gathering".



Secondary schools meet vital needs

FROM pre-school to college, Eritreans have a great thirst for education.

The De La Salle Brothers, Sisters of Santa Anna, Daughters of Charity, the Franciscan Sisters, and the Comboni Sisters are all our friends. They are Eritreans who know from first hand experience that the road from village hut to meaningful work and from hunger to self-sufficiency is through education.

All of these groups are involved in bringing education to the villages, towns and cities of Eritrea. We are privileged to be their cheerleaders-urging them on through tough times with our prayers, friendship and financial support.

It's always a joy to return to St. Joseph's School in Keren (run by the De La Salle Brothers).

The classes from grade one to grade eleven are full of enthusiastic learners who are grateful to have an opportunity to attend school.

Our friend Bro. Awate, the principal, is a compassionate,

This class at St. Joseph's School included one Canadian student.



The dairy at Hagaz School.

intelligent teacher and provides excellent leadership to the school of 1,300 students.

Often there are students with great potential but no means to pay the small amount for yearly fees. Your contributions are used to support students attending St. Joseph's.

At Hagaz Agro-Technical School I toured with Bro. Ghebres (De La Salle Superior) the classrooms, fields, cheese and jam factory, the livestock barns, the winery (wine equals a good source of income when sold to restaurants in the capital).

We also saw the living quarters of 250 young men and women from all over the country. These young people are being educated in animal husbandry, irrigation, crop and dairy production in a country that is hungry. So this school is vital. We have been supporting this education for almost ten years, since it started. ◆

A source of life for a parched land

FEW countries on earth have less readily available sources of water than Eritrea. All but one river in the country are dry year round except during the rainy season--if it comes at all. When it does rain it is usually a torrential downpour that washes away everything--the meagre topsoil, crops, even houses--in its wake.

In recent years, a growing number of microdams have been built in villages around Eritrea to

Mel Best, a consulting geophysicist and professor at University of Victoria, checks out our equipment before it is sent to Eritrea.



Tesfaldet Andemariam at work in the Boggu riverbed.

catch rainwater. But there are problems with these surface dams. There is a high evaporation rate under the searing tropical sun. The ponds attract malaria-bearing mosquitoes and a variety of water-borne diseases. Also, runoff from heavy rainfalls can rupture these earth dams, causing even more serious flooding damage.

Underground dams, built with a barrier going down to bedrock at a point where the river channel narrows, avoid many of these problems. Rainwater filtered through sand and moving slowly can raise a water table and possibly

provide villagers with a water supply from one rainy season to the next.

In Faraleba, located in the Boggu River valley about halfway between the towns of Keren and Hagaz, we have provided support for the village school. Now we would like to help improve the water supply for some 3,000 villagers living in the valley around Faraleba.

Before a dam can be built, the terrain, including the soil and rock formations underground, must be studied. Canada, a world leader in mineral exploration, produces some of the best geological survey equipment. On the advice of our friend Mel Best, we purchased a Canadian-made Scintrex SARIS and

sent it to Hagaz Agro-Technical School (HATS) in Eritrea. Tesfaldet Andemariam, an Eritrean hydro-geologist, has just completed a survey of the Boggu River near Faraleba using the Scintrex. The results can be used to prepare an engineering plan for a dam.

HATS has recently acquired dam building equipment from Italy and has plans to construct an underground dam to provide water for the school and the town of Hagaz. We would like Faraleba to be their second job. At the same time, the Scintrex SARIS is available to study other riverbeds in Eritrea. It could be an extremely important investment in the future of this parched country. ◆

By Dennis Schroeder

Gabions, such as this one on a tributary of the Boggu River, are made from stones bound together with wire mesh. They are used to block water runoff and force it underground.



Helping poor women in their struggles

IN Eritrea and many other parts of the world, there is no “social safety net” as we have in Canada. Women living in poverty have no pension, no unemployment, welfare or disability benefits. The family is expected to provide all that. If you have no family, you have nothing.

The only groups responding to this situation in Eritrea are the aforementioned church ministries who direct monies and human caring to these people. We are privileged to assist with some of this work.

A friend of ours who is a young teacher was travelling by foot between her village home and

A woman separates grain from chaff the traditional way.



This boy's chore is to look after the family's donkeys.

the nearby village school. Suddenly she stepped on a hidden land mine. This young woman had both legs blown off and some others were killed. Her whole life changed in an instant. Hopefully we can help her with financial and practical aid, and our prayers.

The religious Sisters in Eritrea do a great deal of work with women and children. In many parts of the country you can find kindergartens, women's promotion programs, study centres, feeding and nutrition programs and much more run by the Sisters.

This year I visited villages and towns with Sr. Haregu (Santa Anna) to help train preschool and kindergarten teachers. The hard work and enthusiasm of the Sisters and lay teachers is energizing.

At Dekemhare, my friend Sr. Lettemariam is Superior (Daughters of Charity). They have moved into a new elementary school. We provide fees for those who cannot pay.

While I was there we set up the classrooms with materials for Kindergarten.

In the village of Halibmentel, Sr. Thomas and I visited the Kinder-garten; there are now two classrooms and 250 children.

There is also women's promotion (teaching sewing, tailoring and basic literacy). The women work very hard to make clothes for their own families and some can also sell clothes to earn a family income.

Women's promotion is important because women are responsible for keeping the family intact and often alive. All of the communities of women I am honoured to know are involved in this vital education of women. We have provided funds this year to repair and buy new sewing machines and provide loans for talented women to buy their own



Kindergarten teachers attend one of Stephanie's workshops.

machines and start their own small sewing and tailoring businesses.

All the communities I have mentioned are doing their best to be self sufficient. The Sisters sell various hand made articles from small co-operatives. Jam is made from cactus and sold in Asmara. Small handicrafts are made in Afabet and the Sisters are trying to sell them in Europe. ♦

Sisters Haregu (l) and Lettemariam.



Sister Thomas (l) with Stephanie.



UPDATES

Faraleba School

WE have been supporting this village school for several years now. In 2006 we helped them get a water supply for the students.

There already was a cistern (see picture) of about 30 cubic metres capacity but it had no cover and it was not connected to the downspouts from the roofs of the classrooms. We paid for a concrete cistern cover and for piping to bring rainwater from the roofs. Luckily the work was completed before the rainy season and the cistern was quickly filled with water.

We also paid to have air vents cut into the older of the two classrooms.



Feledareb clinic

THE health centre of Feladareb run by the Franciscan Sisters provides health care for ten surrounding villages. We have been supporting the work of Sr. Pasqualina and Sr. Angelica when they were assigned there. Sr. Angelica started many health programs. We just received some photos of her therapeutic

feeding program for infants. One 5-month-old girl we saw last year was close to death from dehydration and malnourishment. Now she is happy and thriving.

IRS study centre

A district of the city of Asmara called Villaggio is teeming with children and youth. The De La Salle Brothers have a small college with 115 students in Villaggio. Called the Institute of Religious Studies (IRS) it offers two programs: Education (three year diploma) and Religious Studies (two years).

The study centre/library welcomes students in the neighbourhood from grade five up. It is well used daily and on Saturday the Novices of De La Salle tutor in English and Mathematics. Many women frequent the centre to take advantage of the learning as they cannot get a place in school. We have assisted this centre by paying a small monthly salary to the young woman who supervises the centre and helps students find books and do research. ♦

The IRS study centre in Villaggio.



ABOUT ERITREA

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 million, 75% in rural areas.

Religions: Most Orthodox Christian or Muslim. Some Catholics, Protestants, animists.

Languages: Tigrinya and Tigre (80%), and 7 other minorities.

How your contributions were used

ERRA-BC ACCUMULATED REVENUES & EXPENSES SINCE OUR ESTABLISHMENT IN 1992 (\$C)

	2006	1992-2006
REVENUE		
Fundraisers	3,480.03	60,055.15
Charitable donations	69,859.87	450,237.32
Charitable bequests	-----	73,885.19
Gifts from organizations	7,048.80	89,306.06
Interest/other	5,416.03	45,437.31
TOTAL	85,804.73	718,921.03
EXPENDITURES AND COMMITMENTS		
One Family orphans	4,825.59	195,431.38
St. Joseph's School/Workshop	3,493.84	40,839.19
Hagaz Agro-Tech School	-----	30,419.60
Faraleba School	15,670.75	39,025.75
Water development	26,994.28	26,994.28
Hagaz investment fund	15,379.08	201,673.75
Afabet Comboni Community	4,883.50	39,388.30
Kindergartens	2,585.37	22,761.03
Poor families/refugees/women	6,081.66	52,723.35
Feledareb clinic	-----	7,500.00
Study centres/Students	5,735.93	21,716.35
Public orphanages/schools	-----	8,711.58
Wounded war veterans	-----	5,449.50
Container shipments	-----	18,323.50
Promotions/Administration	154.73	7,963.47
TOTAL	85,804.73	718,921.03

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**

Tax receipts are issued for donations of \$20.00 or more.