

## **Bytown Orphanage (Centre for the Poor and Less Privileged, Maseru Lesotho sponsored the by Quinte chapter of Help Lesotho**

### **Context**

Lesotho, a small country entirely surrounded by South Africa, has been devastated by several converging factors: the 3rd highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in the world (projected to become the highest); the 4<sup>th</sup> year of debilitating drought; 50-60% unemployment; and a food shortage. Life expectancy is dropping to 37 years with **30% of the children orphaned** by HIV/AIDS. Children whose parents die of AIDS are stigmatized, and there are few adults to look after them.

Bytown Orphanage is situated at Sekamaneng on the outskirts of Lesotho's capital and only city of Maseru (population 135,000). Founded in February 2000 at the request of the government of Lesotho, it is a centre for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Its name in Lesotho is the Centre for the Poor and Less Privileged. With the blessing of the Superior General of the Sisters of Charity Ottawa, we have changed the name for the Canadian context. The children are provided with pre-school within the centre itself. Children in primary and high school attend nearby local schools.

### **Clientele**

Children aged 3-18 are referred to the orphanage by the Government of Lesotho, Department of Social Welfare, they ascertain that the children are in need of care, i.e., found lost, abandoned, or abused. Lost children are often found in the streets of the city and are brought to the centre by the police, social workers, and other organizations. The orphanage provides these children with free accommodation and meals until their next of kin are located by the Department of Social Services. If it is determined that the children have no one, they are admitted to the orphanage on a permanent basis.

As the distinction of "orphan" is somewhat arbitrary in the context of the HIV/AIDS devastation, children who have lost one or both parents through abandonment, illness, imprisonment or other similar causes are taken in. Currently there are 51 homeless children being sheltered. These orphans have nowhere else to go. As the only city in the country, Maseru has a high degree of migrant workers, itinerant unemployed, and people ill with the HIV virus. Every effort is being made -- with very few human and material resources -- to address the physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of these dear children of God.

### **Orphanage Director**

Sister Margaret Mahapang, of the Sisters of Charity, is the Founder and Director of the Bytown Orphanage. Sister Margaret administers the financial and governance matters necessary to manage the centre and its occupants. Sister Margaret is the May photo on the HL 2006 calendar.

The Sisters of Charity is an Ottawa-based order of Roman Catholic nuns, founded 160 years ago. The congregation in Lesotho was founded by Canadian Sisters in 1931 to serve the poor. There are no longer any Canadian missionaries in Lesotho; all members of the congregation are Basotho.

### **Current Financial Situation**

In late 1999, the Government approached the Sisters to found and operate this orphanage for its own purposes -- that of having a place to deposit orphaned and abandoned children. The initial agreement

was that the Government would pay for the “keep” and education of the children in its care. The fact of the matter is that the current payments are totally inadequate to run the institution and to look after the needs of its occupants. Therefore, by default, the Sisters have been charged with its operations and are left to raise on their own to keep going.

Sister Margaret works tirelessly on behalf of these children – scrounging used clothes, funds, furniture, and food from wherever she can. She receives some clothes and modest financial support from World Vision and an annual donation from the National Union of Mine Workers’ pension fund.

The Government has donated the land and constructed several buildings on the site. Sister Margaret maintains a large garden (subject to drought), a hen house, two cows, and several pigs to help feed the children. There is an existing pigpen, a shed for the cows, a chicken coop, some rooms where children sleep, a kitchen, and an administrative office. Thanks to the donation of bunk beds and an extra building, there is additional capacity for 50 more children. This is a wonderful opportunity to use what already exists to help these children.

Sister Margaret needs support to feed, clothe and otherwise care for her charges. After grade six, school fees are compulsory to support the schools. All children in Africa are required to wear uniforms. They may wear the same one five days a week. Students are required to purchase their own books and are sent from class if they don’t have them.

The Quinte Chapter of Help Lesotho from Belleville ON has taken on the orphanage as their project, finding sponsorship for individual children and raising funds for such things as utilities, supplies etc. HL position is that individual children should not have visible advantages over others in the same situation. Sponsors write to their orphans but so not otherwise distinguish these children from the others. The Quinte group work tirelessly to raise money for these children and are devoted to their welfare. Their hope is to raise enough so that more children can be housed and protected in the orphanage.

With funds raised by this group, HL has build a guest house on the premises so that we may send volunteers to help with the literacy and psycho-social needs of the children.