

# LAWRENCE JOURNAL-WORLD

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## Saturday Living

### Outreach to Africa

Spiritual path takes pastor to Kenya

By Jim Baker, Journal-World

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The people who live in the Kenyan town of Maai Mahiu can look up from the base of the Rift Valley and, up in the hills, see "America."

That's what they call the fence-enclosed campus of the Rift Valley Academy, one of the largest missionary boarding schools in the world.

Its students are the children of Western missionaries who've come to serve in Africa. The academy provides them with an American-style, college-prep education in surroundings that, by local standards, are luxurious.

At night, the lit-up campus glows in the vast darkness, the only source of electric light to be seen above the plain. But the people of Maai Mahiu -- who belong to either the Maasai or Kikuyu tribes -- had never set foot in "America," or even seen the nearby facility up close.

Until Zane Wilemon arrived.


Wilemon, 25, spent a year in Kenya, teaching French and coaching basketball at the academy from October 2000 to September 2001 while part of Africa Inland Mission, a well-established, evangelical missionary group.

But his real job -- doing the kind of work he'd hoped for all along -- began when an opportunity arose to help lead the academy's outreach team of junior and senior high school students.

Under Wilemon's direction, the team chose to target its efforts on the people of Maai Mahiu, and especially the 140 children who live in the African Inland Church Orphanage, led by Pastor Jeremiah Kuria.

Each week, Wilemon and a group of students from the academy would leave the school in the town of Kijabi and visit, help and minister to the people of Maai Mahiu.

And, on one notable occasion, the outreach team loaded two buses with children from the orphanage and


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brought them up the hill, for a day of fun and games, to a world that had only been glimpsed distantly.



**Special to the Journal-World**

ZANE WILEMON, center, part-time youth pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church, 1011 Vt., spends time with Kenyan children orphaned by AIDS and famine. Wilemon, a 2000 Kansas University graduate, spent a year in Kenya teaching French and coaching basketball.

### **‘This is nuts’**

"They had never been there (the academy campus) before," said Wilemon, a 2000 Kansas University graduate. "They had never played with a real soccer ball -- they had taken trash from the town and tied it together with a rope. They'd never played on a field covered in green grass.

"They knew ‘America’ was up on the hill, but they'd never set foot there. It was uncharted territory for them."

That's what he had in common with them. Because he was in uncharted territory, too.

A couple of years ago, Wilemon -- part-time youth pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church, 1011 Vt. -- had an inkling that maybe he wouldn't be headed directly to medical school after all.

"I felt a call as a senior in college that my life will be dedicated to God. How that will be fleshed out, I don't know," said the Arlington, Texas, native.

During Christmas break that year, he sent off for information about missionary opportunities to nearly 20 organizations. Two of the groups stood out: World Gospel Mission and Africa Inland Mission. He quickly heard back from the latter, which, within six weeks, sent out a recruiter to talk to him.

In June 2000, after he graduated from KU, Wilemon agreed to attend Africa Inland Mission's three-week orientation school in New York. He was one of 40 candidates attending the session.

"I was the youngest one," said Wilemon, who lives in Prairie Village and also works for Boys & Girls Clubs of America. "I was a rookie. Everyone else were pastors and youth directors in churches. I was a back-pew guy -- come to church, listen to the sermon and leave."

He had a moment of doubt.

"I remember calling my dad, who's not a Christian, and saying, ‘This is nuts.’ He said, ‘Why don't you stick it out?’ So I prayed to be more open, and it turned out to be an incredible experience."

Wilemon decided to go with Africa Inland Mission. But the group had to offer him the post in Kenya three times before he finally accepted.

The assignment -- teaching French and coaching basketball at a boarding school for children of missionaries -- didn't sound like much of a personal sacrifice.

"I wanted to work with Kenyans. If you go to Africa, you want to work with the people of Africa," Wilemon said.

"I turned them down twice. I wanted to do more of a life-and-death kind of thing."

## Gifts from God

In the end, that's exactly what he got.

When Wilemon wasn't teaching or coaching, he spent much of his time working with the academy's outreach team in Maai Mahiu. The town is along what is known as Africa's "AIDS highway," a major trade route between Nairobi, Kenya, and Kampala, Uganda.

Because Maai Mahiu is a principal stop on that highway, prostitution, AIDS and alcoholism are major problems. Especially AIDS, which is spread like wildfire by unprotected sex and carried by truck drivers from town to town.

Fifty percent of Maai Mahiu's population is HIV positive, and there is an AIDS-related funeral every day.

Many children in the town's orphanage have lost both parents to the disease, or their parents are unable to feed them.

"Life is grim, to say the least. It's just dark in that town. We tried to share our lives with these people, instead of just giving them food and some Scripture verses. We let them see the love of God," Wilemon said.

He views his experiences in Kenya from a faithful perspective.

"I think my spiritual gift is trusting God. He took me over there, brought me into circumstances and opportunities. I don't think they were coincidences. They were gifts given to me by God, or assignments. I just took 'em."

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