



TRANSITION CASE STUDY: ENGAGING EVERYONE IN THE TRANSFORMATION

Child Rescue Centre and Helping Children Worldwide

Partnerships **PLUS**



Summary

The Child Rescue Centre (CRC) in Sierra Leone began as a faith-based residential children's home established in 2000 with 40 children rescued from the streets during the last two years of a brutal 10-year civil war.

It was founded through a partnership between a United Methodist Church (UMC) congregation in the US and the UMC Sierra Leone Annual Conference. Within a year, the center added a family preservation program designed to provide material and financial support to at-risk families and remove the need for families to send their children to the orphanage. Over the years, the partnership grew to include more than 10 US churches, and the establishment of a US registered charity called Helping Children Worldwide. The two programs ran side by side until 2016, when the orphanage Director, himself a Care Leaver of the orphanage, approached Helping Children Worldwide (HCW), and HCW's director of programs began a serious dialogue about the impacts they were seeing on the children. They then approached the leadership of HCW and the Bishop of Sierra Leone about

the possibility of transitioning all its programming to family-oriented models of care.

This initiated a process of transition, that over a two-year period, resulted in the reintegration of all 40 children in the residential program and the standing up of a case management system to support children and their families and ensure permanence. Family-based services were also scaled up to support nearly twice the number of children served prior to the transition and the Child Rescue Centre changed its name and shifted to focus on the reintegration of street connected children into families and the launch of transition support services in 2020.

The Child Rescue Centre was the first orphanage in Sierra Leone to successfully complete a transition from residential to family-based care. This case study highlights some of the key dynamics that arose throughout the transition of the orphanage and examines how those dynamics both influenced the transition and determined the type of support provided as well as the most appropriate transition strategy. The case study is organized around the various stages of transition and explores some of the key themes outlined in the Transitioning Models of Care Assessment Tool. Finally, the case study demonstrates how the organizations' approach of radical honesty and radical collaboration at every level throughout the process was a critical component in its success.

Background

The CRC was originally envisaged as a feeding program for street connected children separated from parental care during a brutal 10-year civil war that destroyed the country's infrastructure.

This initial plan was developed by the founding US Pastor and his friend, and a Pastor in Sierra Leone. Plans however changed after an exceptionally generous Christmas Eve donation drive, organized by the US church, raised enough money to start an orphanage with the capacity to house and care for 40 children.

Knowing how challenging it would be to set up a functional childcare facility in a country devastated by a decade of civil war, the founding US pastor invited a number of volunteers in his congregation to help him get the orphanage up and running. Two of the volunteers were a committed and compassionate married couple with a heart for children and an eye for detail. They became involved in every aspect of

the orphanage, down to the tiniest element. Two years later, a volunteer with a doctorate in education joined the team to as the Chair of the Education Committee to manage the children's education. She later took on the role of the Chair of the CRC's residential program before going on to become the Director of Programs in the US and ultimately one of the core team members to lead the transition out of residential care.

Over the course of 15 years, the orphanage was supported by a partnership of a growing number of US-based churches providing ongoing financial support. A US based charity was eventually established to coordinate that support and became the principal donor entity. A family strengthening program ran alongside the residential program for nearly the entire time, with the goal of preventing family separation. Criteria were developed to determine which children were admitted into residential care and which remained with family, but these were not very rigorous, and often, decisions were made by local staff using their 'gut' sense. In 2014, a Care Leaver who had been one of the original children brought into the CRC graduated from university with honors and elected to join the staff of the orphanage where he grew up. In 2016 he was appointed as the Director of the Child Rescue Centre.

Learning And Engagement

Shortly after being promoted to the position, the Director became increasingly uncomfortable with the residential model and its impact on children, staff, and young people aging out of the orphanage.

Adding this to his own mixed experience growing up at CRC - which had provided him access to education but also left him feeling disconnected from his family and community, he began to feel that something wasn't quite right with the residential model. It troubled him that 'residential aunties' (caregivers) were separated from their own children for six days of the week, in an effort to create a 'family-style' orphanage for the children. It troubled him to learn that children in the program were having to sneak away from school to see their families, and parents were having to show up at school to get a glimpse of their child, because CRC staff feared that if sponsors and donors knew that the children had parents and families, they'd cut off their support.

When Ebola broke out in March of 2015, HCW made the decision to halt all short-term missions activities to Sierra Leone. By August of that year, a decision was made to completely lock the orphanage down to all external visitors. A skeleton staff agreed to remain with the children under the leadership of two of the orphanage's founding members, the married American couple who had been highly engaged donors and missionaries to the orphanage since the beginning. The lockdown cut off all connection to the outside world for eight months. Staff with families who agreed to remain in lockdown inside the orphanage were only permitted to see their families across a distance of several yards.

In January 2015 and again in mid 2016, reports of child protection incidents in the orphanage were received. Though these were the first two reports received in the US of their type, the concern that there may have been others that had gone unseen/unreported before the American couple locked down with the children, prompted the HCW Director of Programs to begin gathering research about institutional care. By early 2016, after learning that such incidents are far from rare in institutional settings, she was beginning to wonder if closing the orphanage was the only answer to address these concerns but was hesitant to share these thoughts with the CRC Director who she'd known since he was a teenager in the orphanage. She worried he'd feel that she was denigrating the way he'd grown up, or that he'd feel he would have to defend the orphanage model, knowing she'd been one of the

US team that had supported it from the beginning. They were good friends and colleagues, but she questioned whether they would have the courage to have this difficult conversation.

The research conducted by the Director of Programs led to increased conversations about the need to reintegrate children more rapidly out of the orphanage. It also led to a recognition of the need for Trauma-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) training for the staff to help children form healthier attachments to their caregivers. Staff began to receive this training in July 2015. Attachment training was also added to the preparation for HCW's Short Term Missions (STM) teams when they resumed in the fall of 2015. New child protection and safeguarding policies instituted by the CRC in early 2016 also greatly curtailed the access mission teams and other outsiders could have with the children in the orphanage.

In the spring of 2016, the Director attended a regular monthly meeting of child protection programs hosted by the Sierra Leonean Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA). At this meeting, a representative from UNICEF promoted the idea of transitioning away from orphanage model programs to programs that place children in and provide support to families. They encouraged all Child Care Institution (CCI) leaders at the meeting to consider developing plans to transition their model of care within the next five years. Ministry officials, knowing that the government could not provide much support either materially or otherwise, did not press this very hard, but the CRC Director began to think that this might be the solution to the growing concerns he had with the residential program.

This opportunity enabled the Director and US partners to open a dialogue about the possibility of transitioning the residential program. They began brainstorming the steps involved, identifying the various stakeholders who they knew they could get on board, and those they feared might resist or sabotage the effort. They compiled the research they'd use to convince stakeholders of the merits of transition. Armed with global research collected by the US Programs Director, and internal research into the CRC's own programs and impacts on children in care it, graduates of the residence, and the families who had been separated from their children; the partners decided to develop a compelling proposal for transition as a first step in creating buy-in and engaging stakeholders on both sides of the ocean. The orphanage director's first-hand experience growing up in institutional care lent authority to his voice and perspective, which was difficult to deny. Right from the start, the partners also committed to adopting a posture of radical honesty and radical collaboration throughout the entire process which proved invaluable.

The CRC Director set a bold vision for completing a transition within a two-year period, and in the spring of 2016, began to draft a proposal for transition to a new model. HCW's Program Director gathered research to include in the proposal to further make the case. The proposal, entitled *The Way Forward*, laid out a clear proposal for transitioning the residential program to family-based care. Grounding it in the historical mission of the organization, they made the case that this transformation of the model of care was not a change in mission, but rather a fulfillment of the original mission to provide the best possible care for the children they served. All that would change would

be the methodology for how that care would be provided. The proposal highlighted that transition was in alignment with the mission, more cost effective, would allow greater reach to more children and families, and would align with best care practices in the care of children. It also outlined how transition would align the organization with the stated goals of the Sierra Leonean government. It laid out a path for reintegration and the transformation of the program and possible post transition uses for the existing facilities and included an appendix of research to support the transition.

Preparation And Planning

Engaging The Staff - In Sierra Leone

As soon as the decision was made to pursue transition (at the CRC and HCW leadership level), the partners determined that it would be necessary to adopt a posture of 'radical honesty,' 'radical collaboration,' and widespread stakeholder engagement.

Knowing that the transition would fail if any of the orphanage staff did not believe in, embrace, and see a role for themselves in the future of the organization, the Director began first to build consensus among the local staff. In the fall of 2016, he set up a series of weekly "leadership meetings" focused on meaningful collaboration and open and honest communication. These weekly sessions continued through the entire transition of two years. He started by helping the staff to envision what the organization could be post-transition, including how the organization could not only survive the change but thrive, how staff could find greater enjoyment in their roles, and how children and families could be helped to thrive as well. The Director welcomed questions and challenges

to the proposal and encouraged his staff to share all their fears and concerns openly so that they could be addressed together. He insisted on radical honesty in these sessions, and encouraged staff to raise any and all concerns, questions and objections.

Among these included concerns about the safety and security of the children, how they would find families, how they would adjust to a very different style of life outside the walls of the orphanage, what would happen to the facilities and to their jobs. Working together to address staff concerns and identify possible solutions helped flesh out the transition steps that would follow. By including all staff in these open discussions, down to the cooks and yardmen, the Director also sought to help the entire team "own the change". Staff reported that they were initially hesitant, but being able to voice these anxieties without repercussion or reprisal led to consensus and buy-in. The Director made it clear that he needed all their help to make the transition successful, and also encouraged them to see themselves in new post-transition roles. The Director wanted 100% buy-in from the staff. He understood that it would be critical to the success of the transition that everyone on staff could speak knowledgeably about how and why the change was being made and be prepared and empowered to answer the questions and concerns of others.

Obtaining Important Leadership Buy-In

As the orphanage, including staff employment, came under the United Methodist Church-Sierra Leone Annual Conference, obtaining buy-in from the Bishop was critical.

Not only did he serve as the head of the organization in-country, he was also one of the founders of the orphanage. In August 2017, the Director traveled to meet personally with the Bishop and to present him with the proposal,

review it in detail with him and answer any questions he may have. The process of building consensus amongst staff helped to prepare the Director to answer similar questions raised by the Bishop. Additionally, by showing the Bishop how this transformation could actually fulfill the vision the Bishop had originally cast for finding the best way to care for children in his country, the Director succeeded in helping the Bishop to embrace the solution as his own. The Bishop's ownership became evident in a subsequent planning meeting whereby the Bishop encouraged the leaders to consider this not just as a transition, but a transformation of the program into something stronger and better than before.

Messaging To Principal Donor Stakeholders - In The United States

As the Director built consensus among his team in Sierra Leone, and secured the Bishop's approval, the US Program Director presented the idea to the US Board of Directors and a brand new US Executive Director hired in October 2017.

The new Executive Director had a background in foster care in the US, and immediately supported the idea. The US Board reviewed it, expressed their concerns and questions, much the same as the Bishop had. The new Executive Director became a primary advocate for the transition and sharing the more difficult truths publicly in order to aid understanding. These were addressed - all in that same spirit of radical honesty and collaboration. Chief among their concerns were the potential reactions of the highly committed founder couple who they suspected would not be on-board with the proposed change.

Later that same month, the CRC Board (composed of members of UMC-SLAC, HCW, and the highly engaged founder couple who were reluctant to transition) met in Sierra Leone to review the proposal. While the proposal was not officially adopted during this meeting, a decision was made to create a Transformation Task Force to explore post-transition programs and facilities use post-transition. The members of this Task Force included the CRC Director, the HCW Program Director, and the founder couple among others. The Director was named chair of this task force, and the HCW Program

Director was named as lead representative from the US. Efforts were made to ensure a balance of US-based and Sierra Leonean members, whilst still ensuring Sierra Leoneans held majority on the taskforce to ensure that local voices would lead.

Both the US and Sierra Leonean leadership were concerned that the founder couple might resist, challenge, or sabotage the plans for transition. However, rather than seeking ways to put boundaries around them and remove them from engagement in the transition, they elected instead to engage them as allies in the planning of the transition and future programming. Believing that if they could be approached from the perspective of being embraced and acknowledged for their commitment to caring for vulnerable children in the first place and convinced to be a part of sharing with others how the transition would enable the organization to care even better for them, they hoped that anticipated challenges and sabotage could be averted or at least directly addressed as it arose. In this way, HCW sought to continue to use the couple's passion for the mission, and their gifts and skills, but to place them in more appropriate roles, and clarify the lanes in which they belonged. This would ensure they could continue to contribute in meaningful ways throughout and post-transition, but also leave leadership of the program in the hands of the local staff where it belonged.

In January 2018, the new HCW Executive Director, already working with the Program Director to build consensus among the US staff for this transition, devised an innovative plan to preempt any resistance or sabotage anticipated from the founding group of volunteers and other highly engaged

stakeholders in the US. Rather than putting a presentation together to convince this group to embrace the change, she proposed that the HCW staff invite them to participate in the creation of a presentation to convince other US-based donors, sponsors, former mission team members, and long-term supporters of the wisdom of the transformation. This group was encouraged to participate in order to help the US staff craft an “elevator speech” and presentation in order to help the staff anticipate the needs of those receiving the message. The first round of information sessions included highly engaged regular volunteers, pastors of churches providing financial support for the orphanage, and all US-based founders, especially any stakeholders likely to try to resist or sabotage the transition.

The US staff created the meeting agenda and drafted a presentation slide deck, and this group of founders, pastors, and long-term supporters were invited to help ‘fill in the blanks’ of the slide deck in order to craft the messaging that would go out to the wider audience. HCW staff prepared carefully for this session, rehearsing possible ‘hijacking questions,’ and responses to them in advance, to ensure that the process would not get

derailed by those with an agenda to resist or sabotage the transition.

The resulting ‘final version’ of the slide deck - with input from this group - was then used to present the transition to the remaining US-based stakeholder groups, coupled with emails and newsletters highlighting the “good news.” A series of Transformation Information Sessions were held with different stakeholder groups, to ensure that everyone was promoting and sharing timely and accurate information about the purpose of the child welfare program in Sierra Leone, the transition from residential to family-based care, and the program’s ongoing impact in the lives of children, their families, and their communities. The CRC Director was able to be present at each of these sessions, to offer his input as orphanage Director, Care Leaver, and Transformation Task Force Chair. Interestingly, on the US side, there was ultimately little interest in these information sessions, especially as the organization moved outwardly to less engaged donors and sponsors, who just accepted that the organization knew best.

Implementing The Transition

Engaging Children And Families

Almost simultaneously to the stakeholder engagement process in the US, the leadership team in Sierra Leone began talking with the children about what they knew about their families.

Children readily confessed that they knew where their families were, that they had sometimes seen them at school, or left school to go meet their families at their homes. As contact with families had been prohibited by the orphanage, for fear that donors and short-term mission teams would wonder why they were in the orphanage if they had families, children had had to exercise secrecy to have this contact. That all changed. Children were given the opportunity to speak on the phone with their family members on Saturday afternoons. Family members were invited to come to the campus for regular activities like Wednesday afternoon devotions, Saturday sports, and game nights. Finally, the staff gathered the children together to ask if they’d like to go live with their families full-time. The children erupted in cheers.

Children engaged directly with staff in providing information that helped the team identify as many members of each family as possible. They made requests about with whom they’d most like to be reunified and were assured that staff would make the best placement decisions possible, taking into account the children’s views and all other information. CRC staff gathered the identified parents/caregivers together in a large group to see how they might feel about their children returning home to live with them. In a spirit of radical collaboration and honesty, parents and caregivers were encouraged to share openly. Questions and concerns were welcomed, aired, and addressed. Parents expressed worry that their children had come to enjoy a ‘fancy life,’ and worried that they lacked the financial resources to adequately support them. Parents were reassured that the CRC would continue to provide access to school and healthcare, and that only they could provide the most important thing that the CRC could never provide - the love, attachment, and sense of belonging every child needs to thrive. After receiving this reassurance and affirmation, the majority of parents were thrilled at the prospect of their children returning home to live with them.

The CRC Director felt very strongly that reintegration should not be a simple matter of tracing the entire family of each child and identifying the best placement for that child (though this was a critical piece). He believed children and families should be carefully and thoughtfully prepared for reunification, and children only reintegrated into their

“forever families” when the CRC staff felt that both child and caregivers were ready. Follow-up case management systems were put in place prior to reintegration to ensure a smooth transition and promote and enable permanence for every child. As the active transition phase began, families were traced, and caregivers for each child were identified.

Family Tracing And Reintegration

Reintegration work commenced with family tracing in early 2017.

Staff were able to proceed with reintegration, even though full buy-in for transition had yet to be achieved, as the previous strategic plan dating back to 2011 had recognized a need to focus on poverty alleviation and for care for children admitted due to poverty to only be temporary. Although to date this policy of ‘temporary care’ had not been put into practice, it gave the Director and Program Director language they could use to justify proceeding with reintegration efforts. Once families were located and placement decisions made, the CRC began family reconnection activities to help children and caregivers begin to form strong attachments with each other. Caregivers were invited to attend regular functions at the

CRC, including Bible Study, Game Night and Family Fun Days. Counselors began working with the caregivers individually, and with the children, as part of the preparation. Caregivers were enrolled in a trauma-informed parenting program to help them understand the impacts of trauma on their children, and how they might form strong bonds and healthy attachments with them. Gradually, children were permitted and encouraged to visit their families on weekends, and as they got more connected to their families and communities, to spend long school vacations there. Children were reunified on a case-by-case basis beginning in the fall of 2017 through to the summer of 2018. The last children were reintegrated from the orphanage into family-based care in July of 2018.

Transforming The Program

The Transformation Task Force conducted a community mapping exercise to determine the options for post transition programming, and how the various assets (building, material assets, personnel, etc.) might be repurposed.

In August 2018 they made their recommendations to the Bishop. Options included adult literacy and skills training, an educational resource center, after school activities for children and youth, a nursing school and even a boarding school. While he initially decided to use the facility as a nursing school, a lack of donor funding for this purpose enabled the CRC to transition somewhat

organically into something more akin to a community center. In the summer of 2019, the CRC decided to focus its efforts on working with the Sierra Leone government and Street Child in the city of Bo to trace the families of street connected children and reintegrate them with case management and family strengthening services to support them. In the fall of 2019, the Child Rescue Centre officially changed its name to the Child Reintegration Centre to reflect its revised mission.

In an effort to share the lessons learned through its own transition and transformation, the CRC launched the Teaching Coaching and Mentoring (TCM) Department - its transition support services - in June of 2020. The TCM continues to make contact with orphanages and other residential institutions in the country to advocate for children to grow up in families, and to educate other organizations and leaders on how to transition their orphanage programs to family-based programs.

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Timeline Of Transition

