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The Mission of Cliff & Nkiru Jarrell in Port Harcourt

A Story of Faith and God's Work in Nigeria

Cliff Jarrell is now over 71 years old, but the work that defines his life in Nigeria began more than three decades ago. On March 1, 1993, Cliff and his first wife, Pamela, along with two adopted sons traveled to Nigeria to serve at the Nigerian Christian Hospital (NCH), located deep in the jungle about fifteen miles from Aba. Their original purpose was medical and administrative support, but God redirected their work in ways neither of them could have anticipated.

At that time, maternal mortality in the surrounding jungle villages was reportedly as high as 15 percent. When a mother died in childbirth, the baby often died as well. In many villages, infants whose mothers had died were simply given water until death followed. Word spread quickly that Cliff and Pam would care for babies — and people began bringing infants, uninvited but desperate. They brought babies because they had nowhere else to turn.

What began as occasional care became a calling. Cliff and Pam took in one baby, then another, then many more. Over the years, several hundred children have been rescued from near-certain death. Whenever possible, Cliff tried to return a child to extended family in their village. But when no one else could care for the child, the baby stayed with the Jarrell's — becoming part of their family. At one point, they had fifty children living in their home, spread over two houses.

In February 1998, the family moved to Port Harcourt where they were able to rent a large house. Though it was sizable, it had only two bathrooms for the children, making daily life with dozens of children extremely difficult. Later, they found a much larger home they were able to rent with twelve rooms, each with its own bathroom. The house had originally been built for oil company workers, but widespread violence and kidnapping caused most oil companies to withdraw from the area, leaving the property vacant.

Years after the Jarrells had moved to Port Harcourt, Pamela developed a malignant cancer. She returned to San Antonio for chemotherapy and radiation treatment, but she did not survive. Pam's death was a devastating personal loss, yet the work she and Cliff had begun did not stop.

After Pam's passing, a young Nigerian woman named Nkiru Happiness heard about Cliff and the children he cared for. She came to help — first as a caregiver, then as a partner in the work. Over time, Cliff and Nkiru were married, and together they continued raising the children and expanding the ministry.

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Through the support of believers in the United States, the Nigerian Christian Children's Home (NCCH) foundation was formed in San Antonio. The NCCH foundation was able to purchase the house the Jarrell's were renting. Ownership is held in the names of Cliff and Nkiru which provides a measure of stability for caring for the children. Many of the original children raised in the home have since graduated from college, married, and established their own households, though they remain connected as family. In fact, the first child they cared for is, at this writing, married and expecting his first child.

The home has never fit neatly into government categories. It is not an institution; it is a family home full of a large number of children. Over time, this created tension with government officials who oversee children's homes. At one point, a government official imposed a series of rigid and unrealistic regulations, including a rule that any child over the age of 18 must move out. Fortunately, a separate nearby house was recently acquired that accommodates older children and today the family is spread between two houses but the family remains connected.

As the number of children grew in the Jarrell household, getting everyone ready for worship services each week became increasingly difficult. Cliff, who is also a preacher, began holding services at home. What started as a practical solution for the family soon became a thriving congregation as neighbors and acquaintances began attending worship services. To accommodate growth, Cliff built a tent-like structure in the courtyard using canvas and metal poles. While children's classes meet in various rooms of the house, the main congregation gathers under this structure.

Today, there are approximately 300 members in the congregation. They meet for Sunday worship, Wednesday night services, and a Friday night prayer and singing gathering. Due to extreme poverty and hunger among members, food is prepared for every congregational gathering. Approximately 1,600 meals are served every week. While some cooking help is hired, much of the food preparation is carried out by Nkiru and some of the older children in the family.

Feeding people is not an add-on to the ministry — it is central. Many people come hungry, are invited to worship, are fed, are taught, and respond to the gospel. The growth of the church has been encouraging. In the past three years over 190 people became believers and were baptized. To help with the spiritual needs of this growing body of believers, Cliff is assisted by two other preachers — one older and one younger — who help teach, preach, and follow up with new converts.

Growth of the congregation, the now inadequate worship facility, and lack of classrooms has generated the need for a new building. A small lot near the current facility was recently purchased and construction of a four-story building is in progress. All the floors are in place, and work continues on walls and ceilings. Additional funds are still needed to complete the project and allow occupancy.

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This ministry exists within a difficult and often dangerous environment. Beyond violence, the most persistent challenge is severe hunger. Corruption is widespread at every level of society. Jobs are scarce, and wages are not livable. The minimum monthly wage is just over \$60 per month. Desperation drives crime. Kidnapping has become common. Several of the children have been robbed on public transportation, with gangs boarding buses to steal phones, take what little money passengers have, and beat them. Several young women have experienced attempted rape. Cliff himself has been shot at by police while riding in a bus with children — police officers who routinely stop vehicles simply to extort money. On one occasion, Cliff and Nkiru were forced to lie on the road while a man stood over them with an AK-47, stating plainly, “I am going to kill you.” Their lives were spared only when another vehicle approached, causing the man to flee. Despite these heartbreaking and dangerous realities, the mission work continues.

There are six U.S. congregations that provide some monthly financial support for this important work in Nigeria, but the vast majority of ongoing support comes through private sources through the NCCH foundation. The NorthWest Church of Christ support is but a small portion of their operating budget although it is reported to be the largest from the six supporting congregations. Donations to this Nigerian work can be made directly by going to the NCCH website (<https://www.ncchfoundation.org/>).

Through hardship, loss, danger, and sacrifice, this mission stands as a testimony to what God can do through faithful servants. What began with two people caring for unwanted babies in the jungle has grown into a family, a congregation, and a beacon of hope — feeding the hungry, raising children, and proclaiming Christ in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.