

Chi sent her nephew M.C. (right) to a school of preaching so he could return and work with the church in Aba.

Many people immigrate to the United States in order to improve financially. Chi Ekwenye came to save her people.

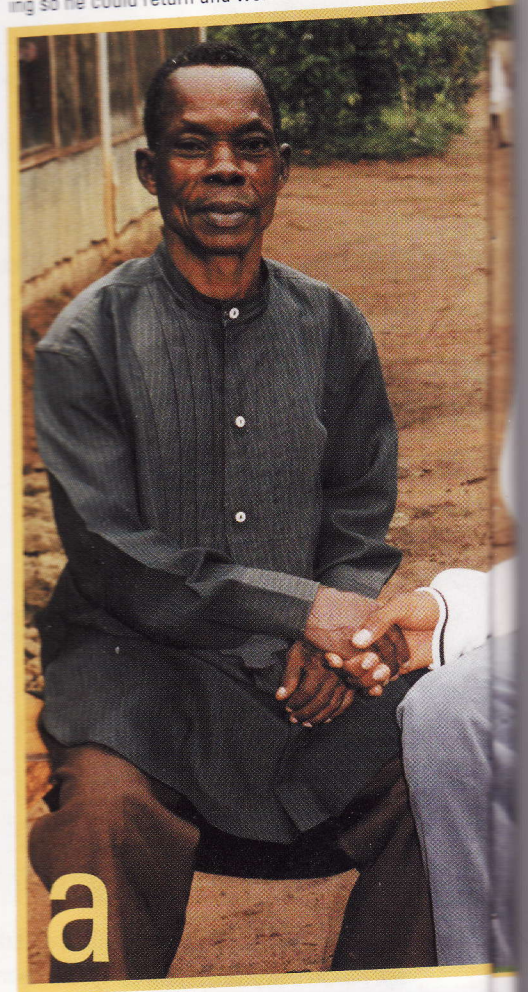
The last of nine children born to a Nigerian rural preacher, Chi understands all too well what war, starvation and destitution can do to children. Ungoverned inflation and humiliating poverty have seriously damaged the overlooked and mistreated children of Nigeria. Conditions such as hunger, child labor, homeless mothers and children, abuse, and babies considered refuse and discarded in garbage cans are all too common sights in that country.

Growing up during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), Chi was not alien to the many issues of poverty and its effects. When just beginning 7th grade,

And He did. Dr. Chi Ekwenye, visionary and winner of an international "one-in-a-million" green card drawing, has been blessed with 20 years experience working in the field of education and social work, including the doctorate she received in August 2000.

In Nigeria, she had worked with the Imo State School System and the Ministry of Education as a teacher and as an Inspector of Education. Stateside, she continued her experience with children by serving as the adoption/foster care social worker for Georgia AGAPE, a social services agency in the city of Atlanta.

After her education, Chi returned to Nigeria to begin her dream by establishing Right Steps in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. This is a program that provides shelter, care and rehabilitation to beggar mothers and their children. It is also designed to shelter,



ONE in a Million

by Anne-Geri' Fann

she saw a homeless woman and her baby outside her school gates. She heard the students taunt her.

Over the years, that picture would stay with her. She remembered thinking, "Someone should at least take care of the baby." From that moment, Chi decided her lifetime dream would be to help. And she never had any doubt as to how she would do it.

Chi attended undergraduate school in Atlanta, Ga., with the understanding from the Nigerian government that she would return upon graduation. But Chi thought she could only help her people with more education. Chi prayed, "Lord, I want to serve the people in my home country. You're the only one who can do this for me. I'm just givin' it to You; take care of it, please."

nurture, and raise the many neglected and abandoned children of Nigeria.

Right Steps is a mission of love directed by faithful members of several Atlanta churches of Christ who have been convicted to extend hope to those who have none. Ultimately, the goal of this mission is to provide help so that the children may be reunited with their families and tribes.

Who Is Helped?

So what kind of people are drawn to this project? How do they come to Right Steps, and who is chosen to go through this program? "Chi goes out and grabs them," says Geoff Geisemann, chairman of the board of Right Steps. "But she chooses people who are in a position to be rehabilitated.



Chi Ekwenye (right) takes time out of her busy schedule to pose with visiting missionaries.

"Women wind up on the street for many different reasons. Perhaps their husbands have died, or they may have been kicked out by their husbands. They may have children or be pregnant from men coming and taking advantage of them. Many men make promises to women on the street, but their words turn into rape. Afterwards, they kick them back out on the street, and then the women find out they are pregnant.

"Often when a husband dies, his wife is thought to be a witch or a bad spirit. She may be thrown out of her home and community.

"If a child is chronically ill, a bad spirit is thought to be to blame; and so the child is often not fed and is abandoned to the streets. Some children who are malnourished are bled

to death because the family believes the problem is an evil spirit and wants to drain it out of them."

"This is the type of thing we are up against," Chi sighs, "not the government, as some may suggest. It will take a long time to educate them differently because these things are so ingrained in my culture. But we must be patient. Patience is everything in this work."

Who Stays at Right Steps?

During a stay at Right Steps, a woman begins understanding what it is like to belong to a family and become a productive member of a community. Each woman is taught a trade such as hair braiding, sewing, cooking or cleaning. Literacy classes are also provided as these are becoming a requirement for many jobs in Nigeria. In these classes, the women learn to count and add, read and write, sometimes in English but always in the local language. Many learn useful agricultural skills for when they set up their own homes.

The mothers are also offered religious and moral instruction while forming new social relationships in their new homes and communities. Women who had no home before have hope of a new life for themselves and their children when they leave Right Steps. Most of the mothers go back to the streets where they once were – not to return to their old way of life but to bring food and medication to those still languishing on the streets.

The impact on their children is extraordinary. "One woman left her extremely sick child with me for

an entire year," Chi reflects. "When the mother came back, she did not recognize her child at all. It is not that she was older but that she was no longer a skeleton. When you see the change in a child from almost dead to vibrant, you know what you are doing is of God. Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but many of God's children still have no place to lay their heads."

Barbara Barnes, Right Steps board member, says, "I work with foster children here in the States, and it is discouraging because we're so caught up in red tape that it seems we take a backwards approach even in this country. Kids get lost in the cracks or end up with families who don't want them or who just want the money. Chi's system is geared to keeping the family intact, regardless of whether it's a complete family or not."

Who Would Do This?

This program was not initially understood in Abia State/Nigeria for this very reason. The question most posed was, "Who would do all this work for people and not require anything of them except to see them become self-sufficient?"

"To me," continues Barbara, "it is a true example of what a Christian should do. You don't put conditions on people; you just love them, serve them, teach them, and let them make their own better choices."

Members of the Right Steps board say that their first response to Chi's proposal was skeptical, especially because Chi did not plan to draw a salary.

"If she needs to do something," says Geisemann, "she asks. She eats and works there. The project seems to run itself. I can't tell you how many times she's said, 'Geoff, we need money.' I say, 'Chi, we don't have it.' Her response has always been, 'Don't worry, then. It will be there.' And somehow it always is!"

In two years, this amazing project has served more than 2,000 people. The numbers are growing, and phys-



These two women have been provided shelter in one of the homes sponsored by Right Steps.

"Women wind up on the street for many different reasons. Perhaps their husbands have died, or they may have been kicked out by their husbands. They may have children or be pregnant from men coming and taking advantage of them. Many men make promises to women on the street, but their words turn into rape. Afterwards, they kick them back out on the street, and then the women find out they are pregnant.

"Often when a husband dies, his wife is thought to be a witch or a bad spirit. She may be thrown out of her home and community.

"If a child is chronically ill, a bad spirit is thought to be to blame; and so the child is often not fed and is abandoned to the streets. Some children who are malnourished are bled

to death because the family believes the problem is an evil spirit and wants to drain it out of them."

"This is the type of thing we are up against," Chi sighs, "not the government, as some may suggest. It will take a long time to educate them differently because these things are so ingrained in my culture. But we must be patient. Patience is everything in this work."

Who Stays at Right Steps?

During a stay at Right Steps, a woman begins understanding what it is like to belong to a family and become a productive member of a community. Each woman is taught a trade such as hair braiding, sewing, cooking or cleaning. Literacy classes are also provided as these are becoming a requirement for many jobs in Nigeria. In these classes, the women learn to count and add, read and write, sometimes in English but always in the local language. Many learn useful agricultural skills for when they set up their own homes.

The mothers are also offered religious and moral instruction while forming new social relationships in their new homes and communities. Women who had no home before have hope of a new life for themselves and their children when they leave Right Steps. Most of the mothers go back to the streets where they once were – not to return to their old way of life but to bring food and medication to those still languishing on the streets.

The impact on their children is extraordinary. "One woman left her extremely sick child with me for

an entire year," Chi reflects. "When the mother came back, she did not recognize her child at all. It is not that she was older but that she was no longer a skeleton. When you see the change in a child from almost dead to vibrant, you know what you are doing is of God. Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but many of God's children still have no place to lay their heads."

Barbara Barnes, Right Steps board member, says, "I work with foster children here in the States, and it is discouraging because we're so caught up in red tape that it seems we take a backwards approach even in this country. Kids get lost in the cracks or end up with families who don't want them or who just want the money. Chi's system is geared to keeping the family intact, regardless of whether it's a complete family or not."

Who Would Do This?

This program was not initially understood in Abia State/Nigeria for this very reason. The question most posed was, "Who would do all this work for people and not require anything of them except to see them become self-sufficient?"

"To me," continues Barbara, "it is a true example of what a Christian should do. You don't put conditions on people; you just love them, serve them, teach them, and let them make their own better choices."

Members of the Right Steps board say that their first response to Chi's proposal was skeptical, especially because Chi did not plan to draw a salary.

"If she needs to do something," says Geisemann, "she asks. She eats and works there. The project seems to run itself. I can't tell you how many times she's said, 'Geoff, we need money.' I say, 'Chi, we don't have it.' Her response has always been, 'Don't worry, then. It will be there.' And somehow it always is!"

In two years, this amazing project has served more than 2,000 people. The numbers are growing, and phys-



These two women have been provided shelter in one of the homes sponsored by Right Steps.

Right Steps is a program that provides shelter, care and rehabilitation to beggar mothers and their children.



Most of the mothers go back to the streets where they once were – not to return to their old way of life but to bring food and medication to those still languishing on the streets.

ical support is sent from all over the United States.

“Sometimes we even get things we don’t need,” laughs Chi. “I thought the microwave might be helpful, but the children just stand around and stare at it, waiting for it to come on. Our electricity is generator-operated, and we don’t have it on all the time to save gas. I can’t wait to get some popcorn from the States and see what they do when I turn that thing on,” she giggles. “They think it’s a television!”

Chi’s upbeat and visionary attitude has kept this project underway and even staffed it. Chi had the foresight to send her nephew, M.C., through the school of preaching in Nigeria so he would be ready to work with the church when Right Steps began.

She also financially supported her niece, Ngozy, to go to nursing school through Nigerian Christian Hospital. Ngozy’s husband is now the General Grounds Manager while Ngozy runs the medical personnel and teaches the mothers how to cook and care for their children. Chi smiles and says, “Who better than family to help you in the work of the Lord?”

Chi has not faced much opposition

from the government of Nigeria. “Well, I stay out of people’s territory,” Chi laughs. “When one gets into someone else’s business, they get threatened, so I stay put. I am not making demands on anybody. Other than being legally registered, people don’t seem to know I’m here. No one bothers me. In the past couple of months, people have started to see what is going on and who is doing it, but I will not push myself in their faces. Right Steps just does the work, and the work will speak for itself. We don’t need to advertise. We just do the work to the best of our ability and wait for God.”

Chi did have to exercise this patience quite significantly in early June while waiting for a container of important supplies from their supporters in the United States.

“The normal procedure for getting a container out is very long,” Geismann explains, “but with an exemption from duty, the application has to be made through the president’s office. Then the application has to be processed. But if you don’t bribe everyone who has to read the letter, it will take forever.”

Chi labored diligently to have sev-

eral high officials push the application through without bribes. However, they kept stalling, promising to deliver but never showing up. So Chi took all the staff and residents of Right Steps to the Port Authority to picket.

“We got what we wanted,” says Chi, “but it was no fun. I hope we never have to do a thing like this again. It was close to 90 degrees with high humidity. The children were hot and cranky, and we were all filthy as pigs by the time we were done sitting on floors and in the middle of roads. However, we are choosing not to count the cost.”

This one-in-a-million green card winner, who worked patiently on her education in the United States for years to be prepared to help her people, sees nothing as a wall that God cannot break through. Her drive and focus have motivated and inspired many.

Nigerian beggar women, incarcerated men, village children, street dwellers, and innumerable others have finally grasped that no one human being has a corner market on goals. Many formerly destitute women and children of Nigeria are finding purpose and their dreams are being realized through one Christian woman who was willing to go the distance for them. □

Anne-Geri Fann, born in New Zealand, has a master's degree in youth and family ministry from Abilene Christian University. She and her husband, David, live in Atlanta, Ga., where they worship with the North Atlanta Church of Christ. Anne-Geri will begin teaching cultural anthropology in the Bible/Missions department at Atlanta Christian College and helping to direct this beginning short-term missions program. Besides beginning work on another master's, Anne-Geri plays the piano and flute and loves to play chess with her husband.

MAKING the Right Steps

If you wish to contact Right Steps, their United States office is at 3545 Chestnut Drive in Doraville, GA 30340; telephone (770) 457-9696. The Nigerian office can be contacted c/o 42 St. Michael Rd., Aba, Abia State, Nigeria – West Africa.

Playing His Tune

by Anne-Geri Fann



The consequence of a slaughter is bloody and ugly. I have witnessed the results with my own eyes, and my heart has just been broken for the nth time this year. Another breach of faith. Another divorce. Another family destroyed.

I walk amidst the wreckage of impurity, beholding charred spirits and wasted dreams. I remember wedding days that now seem like frivolous promises.

I recall youthful pledges of "purity until marriage." Many of these pledges now echo hollowly from the maternity ward.

Single parents, confused husbands and wives, all shedding tears of despair and disillusionment. I didn't plan this. It wasn't supposed to be this way. These are my friends and my family that I cry for.

Asked to write about purity, I wondered if I could have any influence. As of Dec. 18, 1999, I am no longer single. I married an incredible godly man and am very happy,

but I do have something to say to single women about waiting.

I don't know if people will still take me seriously now that I am married. Singles sometimes have the tendency to roll their eyes and say, "Sure, but now you're married – you're not in the same position anymore."

That statement bothers me, however, because I was a content, happy single person and would have remained so without complaint.

Seeing women and girls so obsessed with finding a mate that they gave up their ideals always disturbed me because we already had the truest, most faithful mate possible in Jesus.

My real assignment was to write about purity in singleness. However, the more the topic haunted me, the more I realized the issue is not about whether one is married or single. Married folk have the same battle, much more so than one might care to imagine. The real issue is pleasing our God through holy living.

Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, one of the most honest characters of English literature, was a 12th-century holy man who grappled with sin, particularly that of sexual purity. He was tossed continuously between what was pretty to his eyes and precious to his soul.

He candidly commented, "Lust is the ape that gibbers in our loins. Tame him as we will by day, he rages all the wilder in our dreams by night. Just when we think we're safe from

him, he raises up his ugly head and smirks, and there's no river in the world flows cold and strong enough to strike him down. Almighty God, why dost thou deck men out with such a loathsome toy?"

The Greek word for holy (*hagios*) means "set apart for or by God." Even in the Hebrew texts, such as in Exodus 3:5; 29:37, 44, we see that anything set apart by God is holy, such as the altar and the tabernacle, which had been set apart as holy items.

The beauty of this blueprint is that later, in the letters of Peter and the Hebrew writer, the people of God are admonished to see themselves as holy, set apart by a cleansing that comes through Christ. Through Him, we have made entrance "through the temple veil" to the Holy of Holies and into the very presence of God.

Peter reminds us that to be "called out" is to be "called in" to a new way of living – unrecognizable to the world and unmistakably different. We are a chosen generation and need to act like it, despite the temptation that will regularly challenge us.

Do we follow the *hagios* of 1 Peter, or have we written our own moral code? It is easier to misinterpret "living in the world, but not of it" and to embrace tolerance instead.

Just how culture-conscious should we be? Often we inadvertently fill our minds with filth, passing it off as mature discretion, and imagine that these indulgences have no hold on us. What about our movies and our reading material, for example?

Are we surprised that this era and sexual purity seem unacquainted? Our generation has made it too easy to forget the self-controlled lives to which Christ has called us.

Our reasons for abstinence deal

more with disease than direction. Those delicate moments when He calls us to stand up and play His tune are often deafened by the world's noisy blares. "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11 NIV)

This is where, if you feel it appro-

per, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Proverbs 28:13).

God forgives sexual sin, but we cannot treat His graciousness lightly. "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left" (Hebrews 10:26 NIV).

To avoid regret, we must continually be practicing. We must be honoring our skills of purity.

My friend Mandy wishes desperately that she had said "no" to her boyfriend. Jonathan wants to stand before God and say vows to his wife as a virgin, but he knows he cannot.

Another friend, Jesse, still wishes

appropriate, you may beat your head against the wall. Abstaining from sinful desire often seems impossible, does it not?

We know about God's grace, but we constantly battle with our humanity. We wonder, as Godric did, how to purge the loathsome toy of iniquity.

I often identify with Godric because of two analogous snakes that wrapped themselves around his neck and legs and arms. Although they weighed him down, he did not notice. He was used to their weight as if it were his own.

Those reptiles are our own vulnerabilities to sin, specifically, with Godric, sexual impurity. They refer, like Paul in Romans 7, to everything within us that is more devoted to selfish living than to God. James 1:15 teaches that anything that controls us and separates us from God is sin.

Because we know we were not set apart by God only to be separated from Him, we get discouraged when we fall prey to Satan's ploys. But Ephesians 5:18 calls us to be "filled with the Spirit," as opposed to being "drunk with wine" (RSV). When one is drunk with wine, she is not in control of her body; the wine is in control. In the same way, we are to let the Spirit of the living God control our bodies.

So, yes, through Jesus, sin can be controlled. But the guilt we hang onto can sometimes be the greater villain. Guilt can take us further away from God than the original sinful act.

We convince ourselves that we are rejected by God or that He is angry with us. The longer we hide this guilt, the guiltier we feel. But we must not forget that Jesus died for guilt, as well as for the act before it. "He who conceals his transgressions will not pros-

*What we need
to be prepared
for is the improv,
the moment the
Conductor will
direct His baton
at us, entreating
us to stand
up and play.*

We must spend time with God, letting Him teach us more about His will, His nature and what His lordship truly means. Only then can the snakes of sin and guilt be shaken off.

Even then those serpents may return to curl next to our feet and sweetly hiss of delectable temptation. The call to sexual sin can be powerful. Will we be ready for that moment? We can never blithely think that we now have sin under control.

I once heard a preacher compare those moments of temptation to musical improvisation. Possibly, the music of our lives is jumping along with an easy, pleasing melody. What we need to be prepared for is the improv, the moment the Conductor will direct His baton at us, entreating us to stand up and play.

he had stood up in that Chicago club and – instead of fleeing to the back door – told that attractive woman why he could not sleep with her. He wishes he had told her that God loves them both and has truer things to offer them than a one-night stand.

The holy living that God has extended to us is so much more important than whether I am single or married. If I find myself wrapped up in the fact that I am not sharing my life with someone, I have forgotten the beautiful tune God has asked me to play, and I will not be prepared when I find myself staring down His baton.

God can flesh Himself out in our mortal bodies if we let Him. Or we can, like the fabled concubine of a king, walk on floors of marble while knowing that underneath is the excrement of dogs, grease, spit and bits of bone. The part people see of us may be fair and fresh, but the part they do not see is just as foul when we are stained by impurity.

None of us can luxuriate in inviolability. The sanctity of God often eludes me. My pompous talk about holiness is ridiculous drivel in the sight of the One who knows me totally.

However, I do speak as a child of God who deeply desires to pick up Christ's cross and stab my "ape" until his foolish chattering ceases. May we all be ready to make beautiful music when Jesus points His holy baton at us, smiles hopefully, and says, "Play." □

Anne-Geri Fann is a high school Spanish teacher for Greater Atlanta Christian School with a degree in Bible and Greek from Harding and a master's in theology from Abilene Christian University. She and her new husband, David, are members of the North Atlanta Church of Christ. Her hobbies include throwing pottery, playing the flute, and speaking Spanish on her numerous mission trips to Honduras.