

## Q&A with Ken Hall

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Buckner Baptist Benevolences began in 1879 as an orphanage, initially serving just three children in a small frame house in Dallas. It's now a Dallas-based multiservice agency, working with thousands of people in communities across Texas.

And under Ken Hall, current president and CEO, Buckner has raised its international profile. Mr. Hall, 54, has been the agency's president since 1994. He traveled to Africa this spring, meeting with government leaders and others. Recently, he talked with Staff Writer **Sam Hodges** about Buckner's work overseas. Here are excerpts.

### **How involved is Buckner Benevolences internationally?**

We began about 11 years ago. We had an invitation to go to Russia to help with orphanage work in those early days after the change in government structure from a communist state to a market system.

We worked initially with the government of St. Petersburg, helping them create better protocols for orphanages, helping them create a foster care system, and providing services through the government.

From that platform, we learned a lot of things. Currently, we're serving directly in nine specific countries overseas.

### **What's your perspective on the needs internationally?**

There are roughly 143 million children who are orphaned. That would be either biological orphans or social orphans – children who have no family caring for them. That's half the population of the United States.

### **And how involved is Buckner in Africa?**

Buckner for a number of years has been working in Kenya. We have an orphanage we help direct there. We have a foster care system that works in two major regions in Kenya. We help manage and coordinate it, with the government. Other countries have asked us to look at ways to assist them. On this most recent trip, we traveled to Nigeria and Ethiopia, and met with government leaders in both of those countries.

### **Will you be getting involved in Nigeria and Ethiopia?**

Ethiopia is a definite. We're actually going to be helping to create some community development centers in a certain region of Ethiopia that's underserved, where there are a lot of AIDS orphans and other children that have no families to care for them.

### **What will the centers provide?**

Day care, after-school care, clinics, classes on parenting for people who aren't parents who suddenly find themselves caring for children. It's not just aid. You're helping people move from total dependence on government aid to self-empowerment.

### **You try to have local leadership for your programs, rather than having Americans come in to run the show. Why?**

Our bias, when we first engaged in this many years ago, was not to send missionaries to do this. That had been done for generations, with some success. But sometimes there wasn't much success after the American or English missionaries left. A lot of times, systems collapsed. Buckner's bias has always been to work in a culture, with people who have a heart for kids, to train them and give them the right equipment.

### **How would you describe the AIDS situation in Africa?**

Every time I go, and I have been several times, I'm struck with the magnitude of the problem. I've seen city dumps with the children out there, scrapping for whatever they can find, because all of the adults in their lives have died, and they're looking for something to eat.

We also visit people who are dying of AIDS. Oftentimes there's nothing but a tin wall between one house and another. Everybody is seeing and smelling and feeling the horror of the disease. These children live with death all around them, moment by moment. It's hard for some of us to imagine.

### **What if someone wants to get involved personally, through Buckner?**

We can help a church or group or individual do it in a safe, secure way. If you want to go and give two weeks of your summer vacation and do something meaningful, working with orphans in the world, we can make that happen.

Wilshire Baptist Church [of Dallas] just returned from a development we're building in the northern region of Kenya, up near the Uganda border. Wilshire took 22 people. They did clinics, schools, camps, training programs.

### **Buckner has a ministry to provide shoes in poor countries. How is that working in Africa?**

In Kenya you can't go to school unless you wear black shoes. They've had problems with kids with tennis shoes and sneakers – kids violently removing them from other kids. So they passed a law saying you've got to have a black pair of shoes to go to school.

We've made that happen in lots of regions. What we may do there instead of shipping in shoes is go and buy them, which helps the country and the local businesses.

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