

# Free A Family Presentation

January 15, 2003

Let's make an imaginary trip to West Africa, to visit the village of Fabougoula. There we meet the Diarra family: father, mother, with four children under 10. Three other children are no longer living. Like almost all other families in the village, the Diarras are subsistence farmers. Last year, the harvest was not a disaster, but then it also was not good. The children are not starving, but they also are not getting the nutrition they should have: items like meat and milk are rare treats. They manage to pay school fees for the two boys, but there is no reserves to pay for medicine should someone get sick. And Mr. Diarra is concerned about his two-year-old. For several months now, she has not gained any weight. Her mother is pregnant again, and no longer breast-feeding her, and she shows minimal interest in eating cold leftover millet from the last meal.

Suppose you saw a picture of this two-year-old flashed before you on a TV screen, or in a news journal, with a plea for help, how would you respond? Very likely your heart would go out to this child, and you would want to help. You know you cannot do this personally, so you have to do it through an agency.

The Christian Reformed World Relief Committee then says, "You can help, and a very good way to do it is through Free A Family, because the best way to help the two-year-old is to help the family. And the best strategy is community development, which helps parents get to a point where they can, on their own, provide for the family."

Community development is about teaching farmers improved farming techniques so that they can get higher and more reliable yields; for example, it may mean introducing drought resistant millet, or teaching them about zai holes. A zai hole is created by digging a hole the size of a large flowerpot in your field. You then fill this hole with millet stalks and manure. Then you seed your millet in this hole. Then when it rains, the water collects in the holes, and the mulch holds the moisture there. At harvest time, the difference between millet grown in zai holes and the millet grown by a neighbour who has not done this is absolutely amazing!

Or you might bring a group of mothers together, teach them how to pound their millet and peanuts until they are fine, roast the mixture so it won't go bad in a day or two, and then they have an excellent base for a nutritious porridge for young children.

Or introduce a micro-credit program. Members contribute some of their own savings, CRWRC adds to the pot, and then members can take out small loans. They use the money to start a small income generation project. For example, one woman bought ingredients to make small cakes that she sold to people coming to the market. Another person bought some chickens, and then later sold eggs. One man bought bicycle parts and starting a little bicycle repair business. Several blacksmiths cooperatively bought raw materials for articles they then made and sold. And every month, members of the group would get together to see how everyone was getting along, and to learn basics of running a mini business. At the end of 6 months, they paid back the loan with interest.

And they discovered that people who bought a goat to fatten and sell, although they got a good price for the goat, they did not earn nearly as much over the 6 months as persons who made a small sum on a daily basis. Well, that was a helpful thing to learn!

Another thing! When you donate to community development, you want your money to go to the project, not to administration. Now if you bring 15 farmers of one village together, and spend a couple of hours teaching them about zai holes, then \$CDN 22.00 (\$US 16) a month goes a long way, especially if the teacher himself is a volunteer, and program costs are primarily related to teaching and supporting volunteers. But if you need to pay a staff member to go to each family in the program, interview each family in the local African language, write out the story in French, later have this translated into English, take and develop pictures, and present it all in an attractive format, then \$22.00 does not go a long way.

That is why CRWRC offers Free A Family. Free A Family is a great program because

- It supports community development which helps many families in the same village
- It offers a real-life story of a family in the program, with quarterly updates, but chooses only one family per region, thus keeping administrative expenses to a minimum
- It really does free children and their families from poverty and dependence.

Wouldn't you like to help free a family?