



Jewish Philanthropists Create a Prize for Christian Missionaries



Dr. Russell E. White, in a white and purple cap, operating on a patient at Tenwek Hospital in western Kenya. He is the 2017 winner of an unusual award, the L'Chaim Prize.
JOHN JUMBI / AMHF

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Global Health

By DONALD G.
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Christian missionary hospitals in Africa, which provide much of the continent's medical care but are often desperately short of both cash and doctors, are now competing for a major award: a \$500,000 prize created specifically for them by a Jewish businessman-philanthropist and his wife, a rabbi.

The L'Chaim Prize for Outstanding Christian Medical Missionary Service was founded last year by Mark and Erica Gerson.

L'chaim is typically translated as “to life.” But it “really means ‘to lives’ — it’s plural,” argued Mr. Gerson. “There’s no such thing as a Jewish life lived alone.”

“The Torah tells us 36 times to ‘love the stranger,’” he added, “and who is more of a stranger than the African poor? These moral superheroes sacrifice everything to serve them.”

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Last year’s initial award went to [Dr. Jason Fader](#), a surgeon at [Kibuye Hope Hospital](#) in rural Burundi. Dr. Fader, an American, is one of only 14 surgeons in Burundi and the only one based outside the capital, Bujumbura.

The tiny country is one of the world’s poorest and suffers from the same [ethnic divisions and political violence](#) that led to the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda.



Dr. White in Kenya. His award will be used to train local surgeons.
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The money, according to the [African Mission Healthcare Foundation](#), which oversees the award, is paying for a new surgical building and refurbished laboratory, where local medical students will be trained in surgery, and also for operations and prosthetics to help 350 people walk again.

This year's prize will go to [Dr. Russell E. White](#), a cardiothoracic surgeon at [Tenwek Hospital](#) in western Kenya.

Thousands of Kenyans have heart valves scarred by [rheumatic heart disease](#), which hardly exists in wealthy countries with ready access to antibiotics but is common in poor nations. The valve damage, which can be debilitating or fatal, typically emerges years after a child's routine strep throat has gone untreated.

The money will be used to train cardiac surgeons to repair valves and to treat esophageal cancer and complications of tuberculosis, as well as other common local ailments. It will also pay for ultrasound screening in schools and for antibiotics for students whose strep infections have not yet damaged their hearts.

Mr. Gerson began raising money in 2002 when a college friend, Dr. Jon Fielder, worked in a missionary hospital in Kenya and described an overwhelming dilemma: "Faith-based" institutions provide 20 to 50 percent of all medical care in Africa — [estimates vary](#) — but the American and European congregations that once supported mission hospitals have shrunk.

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The doctors who staff these facilities struggle to buy modern equipment, but every day they spend away raising money means dozens of patients go unseen.

With the money he makes through the Gerson Lehrman Group, which pairs experts and investors seeking advice, Mr. Gerson also supports [United Hatzalah](#) in Israel, a network of 3,500 motorcycle-riding volunteer paramedics who whip through traffic faster than ambulances can.

The new award, he hopes, "will galvanize attention around what these superheroes do."

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