

Helping locals impact their own community

Plastic bags gave gotten a bad rap. In fact, they've been banned in several major cities.

But at First Reformed Church in Fulton, Illinois, the bags have become a ministry. By slicing them up and crocheting or knitting the resulting “plarn” (plastic yarn), members of the church’s Creative Crew make mats for people who sleep on the streets and give them to a nearby ministry.

Plarn mats are more comfortable than sleeping directly on the ground and more sanitary than most bedrolls because they can be hosed off. They raise sleepers off the ground just enough to keep dry and warm.



Mats knit from strips of plastic bags provide a measure of comfort for people sleeping on the street.

At 3 feet by 6 feet, each mat requires about 800 plastic bags, so preparing the bags is tedious and time consuming, says Edie Lenz, pastor of First Reformed. One retired couple in the church is in their 90s and always looking for something to keep busy. For several months, they have committed themselves to slicing up 40 bags a day. The knitters and crocheters can hardly keep up, and neither can the local ministry.

Just as the Creative Crew was wondering where else they could donate the mats, the hospital called, asking if the team would contribute mats to people who are homeless and come for treatment.

Says Lenz: “I am in awe of the way that God has unfolded this project—an idea to meet the needs of those around us has provided meaningful work, service to others, joy, conversation, community, and has allowed us to be better stewards of God’s creation.”

Volunteer opportunity

South Africa vision trip

Setshabelo Family and Child Services (SFCS) works to protect children in their community. They provide social work services with an emphasis on respect, dignity, and empathy with their clients.



If you are interested in organizing a vision trip to South Africa to learn more about SFCS and the ways that God is working in South African communities, please contact the Volunteer Engagement team at volunteer@rca.org.

General Synod meets in June

Leaders from across the RCA will gather for General Synod from June 8 to 13 at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Join the denomination in prayer on Sunday, June 4, asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout the assembly. During synod, follow what’s happening with regular updates and a video stream at www.rca.org/synodtoday, on Facebook (www.facebook.com/reformedchurch), or on Twitter (@rcaonline). Hear what delegates and guests are saying about synod at www.tagboard.com/RCAsynod. Listen to a daily recorded news message by calling 800-968-6063. This fall, General Synod news highlights will be published in this bulletin and in *RCA Today* magazine.

A downloadable PDF of this issue of *RCA Today* is posted at www.rca.org/today.

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A new home for Lehlohonolo

Sixteen-year-old Asive looks forward to getting home from school to play with his baby brother. He likes to see the big smile on 17-month-old Lehlohonolo’s face when he walks in. At school, he brags to his friends about having a brother. Lehlohonolo may have taken his place as the baby of the family, but Asive loves him anyway!

The first months of Lehlohonolo’s life looked very different. As an infant, he was abandoned by his birth parents. When he was found in December 2015, he was placed in temporary shelter at Setshabelo Family and Child Services, an RCA Global Mission partner in Botshabelo, South Africa. Several attempts to find his biological parents were unsuccessful.

But France and Lumkà Nqabeni were looking to adopt, now that their children were older. When Lehlohonolo was nine months old, he joined the Nqabeni family, who opened their hearts and home to receive him. Today, he is a happy, loving, and healthy boy.

The family has big dreams for Lehlohonolo. Xhelokuhle, his 18-year-old sister, wants to succeed in school so she can support Lehlohonolo’s future. She doesn’t want to see her brother face any struggles as he grows. His parents want him to become a medical doctor one day.

“Lehlohonolo has brought so much joy in our family,” says his mother, Lumkà. “We had to learn to love and accept him. He’s brought a smile on everybody’s face and we love him so much.”

Asked if they would adopt again, the Nqabenis give a resounding yes. And this time, a girl, just to even out numbers in the family!



Lehlohonolo, abandoned at birth, has been adopted by the Nqabeni family.

THIS MONTH'S FOCUS: SOUTH AFRICA

What is a strategic impact area?

Strategic impact areas are a deeper way to engage in mission. Networks of churches and individuals partner with local organizations that are already at work in a particular region. The work in each strategic impact area is true to the hallmarks of RCA Global Mission—holistic ministry with local partners—while also including on-site volunteer opportunities and a concentration of resources to bring transformation in a shorter amount of time.

Why South Africa?

In South Africa, 7 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS—nearly one in five adults. As a result, many children are left orphaned. In South Africa, 4 million children do not have parents.

Botshabelo is the largest township in its province, and the combination of HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty, and unemployment have led to the devastation of families, youth, and children. In Botshabelo, 40,500 children are either orphaned or critically vulnerable, meaning that they have been neglected, abused, or abandoned.

Since 2015, RCA Global Mission has partnered with Bethany Christian Services and Christ Memorial Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, to support Setshabelo Child and Family Services (SFCS), a child protection organization in Botshabelo. SFCS addresses the challenges of orphans and vulnerable children by mobilizing area faith communities. SFCS provides crisis intervention and temporary emergency care for at-risk kids and offers foster care and adoption services.

What's next?

Lois Wanyoike is the liaison for the South Africa strategic impact area. She works with our North American partners and with SFCS. She helps RCA churches get connected to SFCS to ensure that children in Botshabelo are cared for in healthy, thriving, and loving families in the local community.



We invite you to join in responding to the global orphan crisis by supporting the South Africa strategic impact area. Whether you are a member of a church that supports mission work in South Africa, you support it personally, or you simply want to witness God's work in the lives of children and families, you are welcome to be a part of the South Africa network. For more information, please contact Lois Wanyoike at lwanyoike@bethany.org.

You can help

To donate online online to ministry in South Africa, visit www.rca.org/southafrica.

By phone (U.S. only): Call Terri Boven at 616-541-0835.

By mail: Please send your check, made out to "Reformed Church in America" and designated "South Africa," to Reformed Church in America, Attn: Finance Dept., 4500 60th St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512, or, in Canada, to 201 Paradise Rd. N., Hamilton, ON L8S 3T3.

Hope for the children of Botshabelo

By Lois Wanyoike

One out of every two children in the city of Botshabelo, South Africa, is orphaned or critically vulnerable—abused, neglected, or abandoned.

In the face of such devastation, community members are eager to be part of a solution that provides loving care for children. Last fall, more than 600 Christians gathered at a community hall in Botshabelo to celebrate Orphan Sunday and to pledge their support to Setshabelo Family and Child Services (SFCS).

SFCS equips and strengthens families to care for orphans and vulnerable children within their homes. Working primarily through local churches, SFCS provides family preservation and statutory interventions for orphans and vulnerable children with a focus on in-community foster care and adoption services.

At Christmas, more than 20 children living at SFCS's temporary place of safety were paired with families to celebrate the holiday. The joy of the children and families was magnified when a majority of the families opted to keep the children permanently through SFCS's adoption and foster-to-adopt programs.

We—RCA members partnering with SFCS—can't provide all the solutions to the challenges faced by children and families in Botshabelo, but as Christians, we are called to care for orphans and to defend their cause. We can each do something to strengthen a community that's so determined to change its course. Join RCA Global Mission as we equip and strengthen churches, families, and the community in Botshabelo to provide stable and loving families for children in need.

Lois Wanyoike is an RCA missionary serving as liaison for the South Africa strategic impact area. She works in partnership with Bethany Christian Services.