

Valerie Bell:

Working Together to Change the World

EDITED BY MARY DARR



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VALERIE BELL

Valerie Bell serves on the MOPS International Board of Directors and is Chair-Elect. She and her husband, Steve, have two grown sons and live in Illinois. In 2006, Valerie traveled to Africa with World Vision (www.WorldVision.org) and witnessed the heart-wrenching suffering that AIDS has inflicted on the adults and children who live there. She returned from her overseas journey determined to engage in a battle against this massive threat to humanity.

Valerie shares her spiritual and practical pilgrimage with refreshing honesty in her seventh book, *An African Awakening: My Journey into AIDS Activism* (World Vision, 2007). And she answers the candid questions posed by three MOPS moms (Melissa Caddell, Jaimee Coon and Susan Besze Wallace) about how to make a difference in a world marred by poverty, disease and hunger.

★ **These three MOPS moms posed the questions to Valerie Bell in this interview, including how they could make an impact on the world's needy.**

 **Melissa Caddell** lives in Colorado and is married to her college sweetheart, Casey. They have three daughters, Cameron (8), Maddy Grace (5) and Reece (16 months). Melissa serves as a MOPS Council Coordinator for Highlands Ranch, Zone 4.

 **Jaimee Coon** attends MOPS at New Life Assembly of God Church in Kenai, Alaska. She helped start this group in the fall of 2006 and now serves as Co-Coordinator. Jaimee is mother to Gabriel (7), Isaac (6), and Amaya (2) and wife to Greg for 14 years.

 **Susan Besze Wallace** attends MOPS at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. This is her sixth year in MOPS, and she's also served on the Steering Team. Her family includes Zach (6), Luke (3), A.J. (19 months) and Todd, her husband.

Melissa Caddell: As a mom, I feel conflicted about HIV/AIDS, hunger and poverty. How do I both protect my children from these harsh realities and reach out to help?

Hearing 25 million people have died from AIDS and 65 million suffer from HIV and AIDS is enough to make anyone wonder: *What could I possibly do to impact such immense problems? Let's just huddle the family together and cocoon away!*

Even though as a mother of young children I cared about the AIDS/HIV situation, I did little with my resources and gifts because I felt overwhelmed and helpless to make a difference. I've since realized there's a downside to "cocoon" living. If we shelter ourselves and our children from the world's heartbreaks, what are we communicating to them about God? Are we acting as if God is too overwhelmed to address global issues such as AIDS and hunger? If we're cocooned, we'll miss the amazing opportunity God has for us and our children to play a part in this unfolding "God-is-still-in-control" global drama of life.

I'd rather teach my children that even at a young age, they can make a difference in the world. I want them to care and engage — to try to do something, even if it's small in light of the overwhelming need. The best way to strengthen our children to walk in the world is to hold hands and to do it together.

Jaimee Coon: Is your involvement with AIDS-stricken Africa more realistic because your children are grown?

Actually, my involvement is due more to first-hand experience — seeing full-blown AIDS in Africa — than to my life stage. There are simply no words to describe what it felt like to hold a 4-year-old girl in a pink crinoline dress dying of AIDS solely because she lived in poverty and hunger and was three pounds too small to receive antiretroviral treatments. I wish every mom could have that exposure. I have no doubt they'd be the first ones asking, "What can I do?"

If we "got it," we'd go through our family's toys, closets and homes looking for things to sell at garage sales so we could send the money to fight AIDS in Africa. Many women, at all seasons of life, do just that! Response has everything to do with exposure and condition of heart, not stage of life. When you tap into your heart, you'll find an unrealized capacity for response.

Melissa Caddell: There is so much darkness in the world. Can I really make a difference as I raise three young children?

Yes, you can make a difference! Never believe anything else. Refuse to be overwhelmed. Be happy to make a small difference, because even small investments

can save lives. Make sure you're donating to a legitimate, recognized organization. Also, remember you're on a learning curve about giving. It may take some education and research until you find a cause that suits your budget and is strategic as well. There are many choices. Almost all of them matter. Don't be afraid of making a mistake.

Susan Besze Wallace: Has your activism changed you as a woman? Is it hard to have patience with our materialistic society?

Africa certainly left me with distaste for my own self-indulgences. Since returning home, I've wrestled with where to say "Enough!" in my life. I've set goals, blown them and learned I, too, can be a stubborn materialist. When I choose "stuff" that limits my ability to give — buy things I don't need with money that could go toward saving a child's life — I have to re-examine what I really value. I can't call my cutbacks real sacrifice ... just small shifts in my lifestyle, \$20 here and there. But together they add up.

I've been visiting the salon and mall much, much less these days. I shop first in my own closet. When I just need to buy something (retail therapy), I try to satisfy my urge with a "cheap" buy — maybe a resale- or garage-sale purchase. But here's the good news: A year of cutbacks allowed me to buy cows for the family of the malnourished little girl who died of AIDS shortly after I held her. I have pictures of them standing beside their cows, and I feel so empowered realizing I made a real difference for them. Their health shouldn't be compromised by hunger again. The return on my small investment was huge!

Jaimee Coon: How do you balance giving financially to Africa with enjoying your blessings and savoring life?

In my book, I wrote about a failure I experienced on the learning curve of practicing self-limits. Right after I returned from Africa, I declared a complete spending fast in my life. I did pretty well for a few months, but then I managed to blow it all on a great home sale at a furniture store. Poof! My savings were gone. I had to start over again. For a long time afterward I felt very guilty. But my spending-fast failure identified my weakest link — my home. I recommend this eye-opening experiment to everyone.

Long-term, it's more realistic to set achievable goals. Then, when I reach them, I can enjoy my blessings and engage in helping others. My love of my life and my love for others motivate me to embrace my blessings while extending what I can to others. I try to let my journey flow out of love and "I'm so happy to help" feelings, not guilt.

Melissa Caddell: I want to help my kids see people in all parts of the world as "those they love, but haven't yet met." What do you suggest?

The way to an enlarged heart is exposure. You might not be able to take your children to "those they love, but haven't yet met" in Kenya, but who's a stranger in your town? Who speaks a different language? Who dresses differently?

Although children can be remarkably blinded to the differences between people, it's usually up to Mom and Dad to be open to inviting and including others. Visit a church with a different ethnic flavor. Spend some time volunteering in the inner city. Go on a short-term domestic

mission trip or host a foreign exchange student. Child sponsorship of at-risk children is another great way to introduce your children to others less fortunate. In most cases, your children can correspond with your family's sponsored children and exchange pictures. People we love, but haven't yet met are everywhere.

Susan Besze Wallace: What can a MOPS group do to help moms and their families in Africa or in other needy areas of the world?

First, check into the approaches your church or denomination already has in motion. Additionally, MOPS International has a great working relationship with Compassion International (www.compassion.com), which offers child sponsorship for at-risk children. Much of Africa suffers from quality and sustainability of life issues — Wells need digging; families need malaria netting; micro-enterprises that encourage self-sufficiency need financing; AIDS education is lacking and medical attention is sparse. The ability to fight off HIV and AIDS is impacted by all these issues.

While this may sound strange, there's a lot to be optimistic about, too. If you decide to do something as a group of MOPS moms, you get to do it together!

I get chills thinking of what a handful of moms who believe it's "their time" might accomplish to make a difference in the "age of AIDS." Moms can bring major hope to this world. In some ways I believe we're "the ones" for this job. Not only can we help others who are struggling to survive, but also we can address our materialism and poverty of spirit at the same time. And we can do it together! **M**



Photos from Valerie's life-changing trip to Africa in 2006. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Valerie with her sponsored girl in Kenya. **RIGHT:** Kenyan children dressed for church. **FAR RIGHT:** Valerie giving her (very happy) sponsored child a "Nemo" blanket brought from the states.

