

As Aids takes its toll of teachers in Africa, Freeplay Foundation, supported by this year's *Times* Christmas Charity Appeal, is promoting education by radio. **SIMON BARNES** reports from Zambia. Photographs by **DAVID BEBBER**

Let us start in the church, then, for the radio was on the altar as if it were the Ark of the Covenant. The village was Makandanyama, and you can find it if you head north of Lusaka, taking someone who knows the country, and you are prepared for a serious hammering once you have left the tar-road.

The church was made of mud and thatch, and was about 10m (30ft) long and 3m (10ft) wide. The pews were blocks of baked mud: the altar the same. Propped up behind the altar, a blackboard the colour of dirty milk. Outside, a small pig poked about. Holiness Phire — one of the great African names — was giving a lesson, for the church building has been loaned to the school on weekdays.

There were 38 children in the class, sitting so close that each child touched at least one neighbour all the way up. And they sang for the voice on the radio asked them to: "Thees ees ay circle, looking like the sun! Thees ees ay tri-angle, looking like a roof!"

When the half-hour lesson was done, they sang again: "Radio time is over! Radio time is oh-oh-oh-er!" Then Holiness led them through their revision. Children — all uniformless, many shoeless — were called to the blackboard to chalk their answers: "Yes. That is right. Clap for her." The class clapped rhythmically, and chanted: "Well-done-well-done, such-a-good-boy!"

There is no messing about, no skiving, no talking, no giggling. The children, horri-fical-

ly poor though they are, know that they are privileged beings. "Before, the children did not know anything," said one of the founding parents, Dorothy Kapeche.

Who started the school? The villagers. They set it up four years ago. Whose idea was it? The villagers. Who pays for the school? The villagers. Who pays Holiness Phire? No one, she is a volunteer. They have the occasional whip-round for her, but there is very little cash; they are subsistence farmers. But feed the teacher and you feed the future.

Makandanyama is close to the Broken Hill Mine, but the lead and zinc have gone, and the former mine-workers now work the top of the land again. The school is a response to an incomprehensibly tough situation. And it is perfectly clear that it is not about education. It is about hope. The school is at the heart of Makandanyama's hopes: and the heart of the school is the radio.

The radio is a thing of bright blue plastic and at its back there is an unexpectedly hefty handle. Whiz this round a few times, and the damn thing will keep going. Where the hell would people like these get a battery? Dead battery: dead school: dead hope.

Apart from the radio, there is almost nothing of the school: exercise books tattered and torn and treasured like a Shakespeare first folio, and the blackboard. The strength of the school is in the people: the pupils, the parents, the teacher, the community.

"We are not able to get to a normal school,"

For hope, turn the handle

said Doris Kapeche. "Here we have economic hardship. But we have the radio; and with the radio, they do better than children from a normal school." Holiness confirmed this: "They like listening to the radio. They have to concentrate, or they will miss something. This makes them very strong in listening skills."

So why, in a community that has its being in maize, rice, groundnuts and beans, are the people so keen on ensuring that their children know the difference between a circle and a triangle? Dorothy Kapeche said: "With education there can be employment. With education, the children will be able to take care of their parents."

That is the heart of the matter. In a poor country, your children are your old-age pension. Your children are continuity and safety. With education, there is a chance of breaking the cycle of eating only what you grow. The school, for everyone in the village, embodies the notion that life continues and is capable of improvement.

In the community of Twelekesha, just outside Lusaka, there are nine utterly extraordinary women. They are all illiterate. But they set themselves up as home care workers. They visit homes and attend to the bed-ridden, or rather floor-ridden, for no one can afford a bed here. It is an awful job, and they do it because someone's got to. But it's worse than that. Time and again, they came upon the same story. Roughly speaking it is the story of Lucy Banda.

Lucy Banda is a grandmother. All her children are dead, and all their spouses too. This has left her with four orphaned grandchildren: Chifichama, Chileshe, Joseph and Chewe. The oldest is 12, the youngest 7. Lucy Banda looked out with the eyes of total defeat: "I don't know what will happen," she said. "I have no means. I don't know how the children will grow up. I have no

hope." Chewe, the only girl, began to weep, silent and unneringly still.

But the Nine Women of Twelekesha are full of hope. That's why they founded a school for the Aids orphans. They feed them at the school, and when they have no maize, they beg for it a scoop here, a scoop there. Today, the children were subdued; there was no lunch, but enough had been scrounged for a post-school meal.

Julia Chiboda, one of the Nine, said: "We have hope. We have been open for two years now, and the radio has been a great help to us." And so, when radio time was over, and the lessons had been done, the Nine Women got out their drums and sang: thank God for all the good things in their lives. The sound of rejoicing followed us as we drove away, feeling very strongly that life was both a great deal worse than we had ever dreamt, and a great deal better.

At Mulolokeni, the classroom is a mpundu tree, and it gives an edible fruit in season. Prisca Gaviro was giving her lesson, post-radio. "Kawakalala means thief. Mukazi means woman. Write that down in your books." The pupils squatted on half-bricks, perfectly attentive. This place was a battlefield during the Bush War, and the community are mainly settlers from Zimbabwe, full of immigrant vigour. The teacher's voice, in the sweet, soft accents of Zambia, led the children gently towards literacy.

They had started to build Nangombe school the morning I arrived. When I say "they" I don't mean hired labourers, or a government-sponsored construction firm. I mean the villagers. The foundations were being dug out, and they were already waist-deep. And there in the middle, wielding a pickaxe was the chairman of the education committee, Benson Njovu. You don't often find the chairman of the board of governors at the bottom of a trench.



Below: pupils at the Makandanyama Community School in Zambia where radio plays a key role. Right: Holiness Phire, their teacher and Tamson Kayanda, learning to read aged 59



The building of the school requires 4,000 bricks. In places like Nangombe, if you want bricks, you make them. Mould them from mud and dry them. Build a kiln and bake them for four days. Let them cool for a few weeks. Build a school. The first run of the foundation was finished by midday: in 12 weeks the school will be built.

Two myths. The first is that the women of Africa are silent, oppressed, subservient. I found women of strength, character, force and effectiveness everywhere I went: sometimes as leaders, sometimes as partners. Partnerships include the building of schools: who do you think brought the sand the two kilometres from the river? They carried the stuff on their heads: how else?

The second myth is that Africa is a continent of beggars, helpless, hopeless, holding out the bowl for yet another handout from the rich. Nangombe was just one more community that had taken the initiative itself, done the hard yards, and was bright with an optimism tempered by the certainty that life would continue to be very hard.

The teacher, school-educated but untrained, unsalaried, came from the community: but shape and purpose was given to the school by the blue plastic radio with the handle in the back. For hope, turn handle.

The radio programmes are put together by the Ministry of Education in Lusaka: five half-hour programmes for each school day. It is meant for children, but there are adults all over Zambia who sneakily listen to improve their own lot. The Nine Women of Twelekesha have also acquired some basic learning. "We told them that we had no programme for adults," said Sera Keriuki, from the Education Development Council in Lusaka. "But they ignored us." "They", in this case, were the villagers of Cheelo, which is 15km from the nearest government school.

When the school at Cheelo was officially opened, Tamson Kayanda, 59, pushed his way to the front and seized the microphone for a memorable speech. "We who were forgotten have been remembered," he said. "It is as if we have joined the human race."

Kayanda is a pupil and his son Lennox is one of the teachers. As a result, Kayanda père can write his name, rather than make a thumb-print. The adult learning is a fringe benefit to Cheelo's school. There are 15 of 15 in school, like Brenda Himbalambo.

Brenda Himbalambo and Polica Michelo took me down to see the Cheelo school vegetable garden, with its beautiful okra. They sell it for cash and the cash goes to the school. "I have learnt many things at school — eg, how to care for a vegetable garden," Michelo explained.

The school was built by the village, naturally, and the women set what might be an all-African sand-carrying record, bringing the fine sand in from 7km away. They ran out of bricks towards the end, and so they borrowed some: the village church now has a sizeable hole in it. An intriguing sense of priorities, but they are building a new church, and a new house for the teachers as well.

And at the heart of everything, the radio, the blue plastic machine that, at the turn of a handle, exudes pure hope. Buy one for Christmas: it's the most remarkable thing you will ever do.

The radio programmes are meant for children, but adults listen in too

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