

Hagemeiers devote lives to Africa

When Ralph and Shirley Hagemeier first applied to become missionaries to Africa, they felt it was God's call for their lives. Now, 39 years later, their conviction to continue working in their adopted land remains as strong as ever.

"They really have a heart for the people of Africa," said Billie Beckworth, the office manager at Bible Outreach Ministries, the Hagemeier's home base here in West Columbia.

Ralph and Shirley were both students at Southwestern Assemblies of God University in Waxahachie when they met and had their first date in 1959. During that evening they each shared their belief that they had been called to go to Africa.

Two years later they were married and began working in the ministry, first in Ralph's home church, the Gulf Coast Christian Center in West Columbia, and then in Anton, Texas. They were blessed with two daughters, Stephanie and Melody.

Then, in 1966, they were approved to go to Tanzania as missionaries and the next chapter of their lives



Ralph and Shirley Hagemeier

Beckworth said, how much difference can be made in the lives of the Congolese people with a small contribution.

One particular passion for the Hagemeiers has been the building of widow's houses.

"When a woman becomes a widow, she is cast out," Beckworth explained. "She has no home, and many times even her family will not care for her."

The Hagemeiers buy small parcels of land and build houses for the widows, for only a few hundred dollars each.

Clothing is purchased locally for \$100 a bale. This is preferable to having boxes of clothing sent from the United States,

begin. The Hagemeiers were in Tanzania for 15 years, working with various ministries including Bible School to help train new pastors.

After coming home from Tanzania, and with their girls in college, the Hagemeiers began to feel a new call to start a Bible School in Zaire.

"They bought 98 acres," Beckworth said. "They built an eight foot concrete wall around it; that's taken 14 years."

The compound includes a Bible School, kindergarten, elementary and high school, there is a dispensary, and orphan children are weighed and given food supplies each week.

The compound is a safe haven in a land of continuing unrest. Zaire is now officially called the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but rebuilding the country and the lives of its people will take a long time.

The Hagemeiers help to provide work, medical assistance, food and clothing to many of the country's poorest residents.

It is a lifestyle very different than most of us would consider embracing willingly.

"There is no air conditioning, and they have to haul water," Beckworth said. The Hagemeiers have access to the Internet, if they make a day's journey to a friend's home.

It is hard to fathom,

begin. Beckworth said, because of the length of time and the restrictions placed on such shipments by the customs officials.

Cement for building can be purchased for \$11 per sack, and a year of school for children in grades K-12 costs \$30. Bibles are \$5 each.

The Bible School has trained hundreds of young men to become pastors throughout the country.

The Hagemeier's daughter, Stephanie, has worked with them for the past 18 years, and is in charge of the dispensary and the orphan ministry.

"Orphans are placed with local families," Beckworth said, rather than being in an orphan's home.

In 1991, Stephanie adopted six-day-old twin girls whose mother died in childbirth. They are now 14.

The Hagemeier's other daughter, Melody, and her husband, Mike Davis, worked with them for about a year and a half, but now live in Pueblo, Colorado where they founded Rocky Mountain Family Church.

Ralph and Shirley are expected to come back to the United States for a visit in July and August, Beckworth said.

Even though they are 65 and an age when many people consider retiring, they have no plans to give up their ministry.

"All they can think of is what else can I do for these people," Beckworth said.