

Give Refuge Campaign  
*A closer glimpse at the orphan crisis  
and a journey through a few months at the Mwana Refuge*

Campaign: #MwanaGivesRefuge

**Eighteen babies in six months.**

In the past six months alone, Mwana Villages has welcomed eighteen new babies to its Mwana Refuge. That's eighteen lives who may otherwise have faced death, trafficking, or neglect are now safe and thriving in our care. But why so many children in such a short period of time? These first few posts, we'll dive into the "why" behind the seemingly sudden influx, and most importantly what YOU and Mwana are doing to provide refuge.

**Cultural roots of the orphan crisis.**

Eighteen babies have been carried into our Refuge doors in the past six months; most of them, heart-breaking abandonments. Our hearts ache at this reality which begs the question, "why so many abandonments?" Many of us cannot fathom walking in our neighborhood to hear a newborn's cry from the side of the road, but in Congo, this is life. There are cultural and societal roots of the all-too-common phenomenon of abandoned children, and today we'll share a few of these. We must firstly understand how "survival mode" shapes a culture broadly (in its community) and personally (within a family). A country in which one in five children will not live to see their fifth birthday is a country operating in survival mode. This survival mode for families and communities means that sickness, a spouse's sudden death or a job loss can plummet a family into desperation where the outlook is so grim that abandonment seems inevitable. But there are also cultural roots to abandonment: a new spouse rejects the would-be stepchildren; a child with special needs or abnormalities is seen as a curse or product of witchcraft; rape or otherwise unwanted pregnancy threatens a woman's acceptance in her community. The ends are the same: a child, abandoned, faces grave danger and death.

**Special needs in the culture.**

Charité. Gabriel. Grace. Our beloved Chloé. These are cherished and familiar names of children in our Mwana Family, each child with his or her unique story, unique personality, wonderfully made. But these children also have something else in common: they all are children with special needs. The severe lack of resources (medical, educational, therapeutic, etc.) in the country often means that families who would otherwise care for these children have very few options. However, it is also true that children with special needs are viewed as inferior, worthless or even cursed. Infanticide at the hands of family members or even

physicians, “exorcism” through physical torture and brutal neglect are shocking realities for children with special needs. But we who see these wonderfully created children stand up against these lies. We proclaim their value and worth to the watching world, holding their precious lives up as a light and testimony.

### **Trafficking.**

Eighteen babies in six months. We looked at a few of the cultural and familial reasons why children are abandoned, but we also welcomed these beloved children for one very clear reason: one victory of justice in the fight against trafficking. While there are aspects that we cannot publicly discuss, trafficking remains a dark reality in Congo. “Trafficking” is most typically in the forms of sex trafficking, forced labor or unethical and illegal “adoption,” but in every instance, the reality is the same: one child’s dignity is traded for personal, illicit gain. In the early days of our Mwana Refuge, we confronted several key players involved in trafficking, and we took a firm stance that EVERY child deserves dignity and respect. We boldly proclaimed that we would fiercely defend and protect our Mwana children no matter what. Consequently, these key players sought other avenues to prey on vulnerable children. Please take a moment to let this hard reality sink in: the 18 children who have come to the Mwana Refuge do not represent a sudden increase in the typical rate of child abandonment in Congo. The same number of children have been abandoned, many of whom consequently “disappeared” through other avenues. But with some significant changes to key players in the last few months, justice is winning. Eighteen souls, each of whom just weeks ago may have become another statistic chalked up to “human trafficking,” have now entered our doors as beloved children in the Mwana Family.

### **The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.**

Over the past few months, you all have watched many babies from a local NICU join us in the Mwana Refuge: Eve, Alex, Marcus, Nathalie, Cecile and many others were all cared for at the hospital as newborns until they were strong enough to join us at the Mwana Refuge. On a recent visit to one of the local hospitals, one physician shared that they can receive as many as 40 babies in one day at their NICU. Due to reasons we’ve discussed before (poverty, illness, cultural beliefs) many of these children will be hospitalized with no one to advocate for them. But Mwana is filling the gap. We have hired two caregivers whose full-time job is to care for the hospitalized children without advocates. Your donations provide milk, diapers, medicines, IV bags and oxygen masks for these babies. Our commitment to these babies is testimony to the hospital staff and local community that every life, no matter how little, matters.

### **The Power of Sponsorship.**

“The work that Mwana is doing with NICU babies is especially meaningful to me as a NICU nurse. My heart breaks for all of the challenges they’re facing on a daily basis in the NICU. I’m

so grateful that Mwana steps in to advocate for babies who may otherwise be abandoned or mistreated. Knowing that these babies haven't been forgotten and that they have someone fighting for them to get the love and care they deserve makes me passionate about partnering with Mwana! It brings so much joy to see pictures and read updates about these babies thriving as a part of the Mwana family!"—Laurel, Mwana sponsor

"My husband and I have always felt passionate about doing whatever we can to support orphaned and vulnerable children. About a year ago, I came across an article detailing the injustices that plague numerous adoption agencies around the world. I was heartbroken to learn that many of the children who are put up for adoption are tragically separated from family members who, with adequate support, would be more than capable of caring for these children. We knew that going forward, we wanted to support organizations that prioritize keeping families intact and were overjoyed when we came across a video depicting the amazing work God is doing at Mwana. It brings us such hope to support not only the children whom Mwana cares for, but also the mothers and family members who, through God's grace, are in the process of taking the necessary steps to be reunited with their children. We're so grateful to have the opportunity to support such an amazing ministry." —Mia and Alex, sponsors to three Mwana individuals

"My husband and I are passionate about orphan care and have traveled to Africa a number of times. Based on what we've seen there, we often talk about the ethics of orphan care and what we believe is best for those children. We hadn't quite been able to find an organization that we felt fully aligned with our views until we heard about Mwana. It seemed providential once we learned about their dedication to ethical orphan care and family reunification. We immediately felt a sense of renewed hope and knew that this was an organization we wanted to fully support!" —Laurel and Jon, sponsors to two Mwana babies

### **Outcome: Reunification.**

The day a child enters the Mwana Refuge, we begin praying and working toward their long-term outcome. First and foremost, we always seek family preservation and reunification whenever possible. Some of our most humbling and touching moments have been those of reunifying a family. Ethan joined the Mwana Refuge as a newborn, having been abandoned by parents who did not have the resources to care for him. But family reunification is not always about biological parents. Today, Ethan's grandmother faithfully cares for him and he is thriving alongside cousins and neighbors. Prioritizing family reunification and seeking family preservation is often a commitment to coming alongside families in their work toward self-sufficiency. It's often difficult and complicated work. But such priorities are the only ethical approach to orphan care, and this ethical approach addresses the very roots of the orphan crisis and ultimately seeks orphan prevention. For the mothers and children for whom we have provided refuge, we can look each other in the eye and say "One less orphan."

## **Outcomes: Adoption.**

Outcome: Adoption. While family preservation and reunification is always our first priority, and a goal we seek earnestly and resolutely, it is not always possible. Some situations of abandonment, neglect, abuse or familial death mean that some children will be in need of forever families through adoption. We have joyfully welcomed Congolese, French and American families as adoptive families and are glad to share with you one family's journey.

"Insistently, we pursued growing our family only through ethical adoption. When we found Mwana Villages, the pieces clicked together and we kept saying, 'I can't believe a place like this exists!' The more we heard, the more we knew this was the organization to stand behind. When the directors of Mwana Villages told us about Raphaël, our hearts lit up inside us. We already have three biological children, ages 11, 9 and 7. Raphaël rounds us out to a party of six and even keeps the age pattern going, since he is 5 years old. As we considered adding a fourth child to our family, we kept repeating, 'He just fits. We have room for him. He's already one of us.' –Barbara, Mwana adoptive mama

## **Refuge Mwana.**

Outside the Mwana gates, a sign reads Refuge Mwana. The word *refuge* is a powerful word. For those who are hurting, it is a sanctuary. For those who provide it, it is a humbling privilege and solemn responsibility. But refuge is not just a place where you come and you heal from the crisis you face. It's a place where you gain strength and from which you proceed outward with hope, renewed and emboldened. It's a powerful word, refuge, and for those of us with the ability to provide it, let us not take it lightly. While you may be a few miles down the road, or thousands of miles across the world, you have the ability to provide refuge by partnering with a ministry who is doing just this in everyday ways. We ask: how will you provide refuge?

Our vision is "To empower the vulnerable in Congo and beyond." Congo is a tough place – its vulnerable are among the most marginalized in the world. And many, many lives are struggling in this country and outside its borders. As we, hand in hand, look toward the future, we believe that true life transformation, one life at a time, is possible.