Jeff: After you committed your life to God, you spent some significant time praying for a work to do. Tell us about this.

Karen: Around age 30, I was newly awakened to God’s love. I began to understand, for the first time, the Good News—God loves us, and we can’t do anything about it. This is a paraphrase of a quote from La Sierra University theologian Fritz Guy. The only response one can sensibly make in return is gratitude. For me, this took the form of frequent fervent prayers asking God to give me a work to do for Him.

Each summer for five years, I went to the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Northern California to pray, since it has always seemed to me that God can be better heard in the quiet of nature. I was hoping that He would give me at least a small way of demonstrating my gratitude for His saving grace. I had had, since age 9, a vague notion of doing something for orphans, but I did not ask God for a specific work to do. Year Five, He responded to my prayers.

Karen Hanson Kotoske is the founder and Executive Director of Amistad International, a charity that sponsors programs for impoverished children and women in eight countries. She has a B.S. in Dental Hygiene from Loma Linda University. In 2007, Karen was honored as a Woman of the Year by the Association of Adventist Women for her work in philanthropy. The preferred method for contacting Karen is by e-mail: tomamistad@aol.com. Address: P.O. Box 455, Palo Alto, CA 94302 U.S.A.

Jeff Boyd has an M.A. in Peace Studies from the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and an M.B.A. from Andrews University. He is the Assistant News Editor at Adventist Today, the Editor of the Adventist Activism blog, the Secretary of Adventist Peace Fellowship, and Research Coordinator at Tiny Hands International, an organization fighting human trafficking in Nepal. Mr. Boyd lives in Flint, Michigan.
Jeff: Your trip to Mexico in 1980 must have been part of this answer.

Karen: At age 35, by then married to my husband, Tom, for seven years and a dental hygienist for 13 years, I went to Guadalajara, Mexico, to visit my brother, who was attending medical school at the Autonomous University. On my first Sabbath there, I learned that the Adventist medical students, with the help of their pastor, Bill Baxter (a pilot with a plane), had restarted a flying clinic for the Huichol Indian tribe in the Sierra Madre Mountains of western Mexico, an area with no roads, electricity, phones, or running water. Baxter had first flown to this tribe in 1953 and had built the first Huichol elementary school. They invited me to fly with them on one of their clinic days.

The trip on May 18, 1980, left me quite different. Deplaning at the tiny village of Ocata del Llanos, the pastor asked if any ill persons wanted to see the medical students. But the villagers’ only request was for food. Because of the drought, they were down to their last grains of corn.

Pastor Bill and the students flew away to buy corn in a more developed area, leaving me alone in the village. I had never before been with anyone who had little or no food. I thought: Maybe helping with the flying clinic is something I can do.

After I returned to California, I filed the IRS papers necessary to start a non-profit and began to tell people about the Indians who lived on the edge of starvation, with no clean water, almost no access to medical care, and very few schools. At first it was discouraging. It was clear I was not a fundraiser. But I had a reason to continue trying—people needed help. It was that simple.

Jeff: Had you been involved in service and social action before this?

Karen: I had done no volunteer work before my awakening at about age 30. During my five-year waiting period, I volunteered in my local community teaching English as a Second Language through the Red Cross and helped the “Friendly Visiting Service,” which pairs volunteers with housebound and handicapped people.

A bit later, once I began Amistad, I volunteered in a food outreach to the “John Muirs” of our area—people who were living in our dry creek beds, or on the street, or in the VA hospital. For a while, I was a volunteer chaplain at Stanford University Hospital.

Jeff: Turning now to Amistad, what is the significance of the name?

Karen: Amistad means friendship in Spanish. Any outreach that has lasting value must be based on friendship and trust.

Jeff: In what ways has friendship been important in your work?

Karen: The majority of our projects have been made through people that I consider friends. For example, I have a friend who was attending my church while she was getting her Ph.D. at Berkeley and who now teaches Eastern Religion at the University of California. She wrote me: “Karen, I’ve got a graduate student who’s studying in Varanasi, India, and she’s come across a little school that just started up in somebody’s front yard. It’s struggling, and she would love to help it out. Is there any way you could help this school?”

So her student started writing to me and telling me about a wonderful Indian woman, Rajan, who had built some little rooms and was teaching 60 kids how to read and write. We became her sponsors about eight years ago, and now she has 220 kids. Thirty-eight of them have already gone on to middle school, and some of them will probably graduate from the university someday. But it was through a friend that I heard about Buddha’s Smile School.

As for the home for girls of sex workers in Calcutta, that started after I saw Born Into Brothels. I knew I had to do something to help the children of prostitutes in Calcutta. It took me several days to think of a woman I know, Juthica Stangl, who has a project—Shadhika—for imprisoned women in Calcutta. I e-mailed her: “Is anybody helping the children of the sex workers in Calcutta?”

Juthica’s husband answered, “Karen, New Light/Calcutta’s project director, Urmia Basu, is here in Paulo Alto this week, and she’s going to be leaving in a couple days. Come over to our house and meet her. She runs a program for children of prostitutes in Calcutta.”
I went over to their house and met Urmı, who has become a very dear friend of mine. She spent the afternoon telling me about the hundreds of children who come to her two shelters in the middle of the red-light district to study, wash, eat, and receive medical care. Paid teachers and volunteers give each child love and attention. Typically, the children arrive in the afternoon and stay until late at night while their mothers ply their trade in tiny one-room, doorless “homes.”

Urmı wanted a home where the girls could live safely, receive a good education, and be free from pressure to enter their mothers’ line of sad, deadly work. These women don’t belong to a caste, so they have no place in society, and neither do their daughters. We helped Urmı Basu open Soma Home, which now houses several dozen girls, the eldest of whom have already graduated from high school and have gone on to college to learn a trade. One girl has become a social worker. Urmı is hoping to start businesses so she can employ the graduates. If you saw them in their sharp school uniforms, you’d think they’re private school students from prosperous families. All they needed was opportunity to realize their potential.

Another experience: In 1996, walking down the street a few blocks from my house, I passed a neighbor and started talking to her. She knew I was a Seventh-day Adventist, and she said, “Oh, Karen, my son just married a girl who was raised Adventist, and her mother’s an Adventist, and they live in Portland, Oregon. And her mother, Paula Leen, is in Zimbabwe trying to help orphans.” Within a few weeks, I met Paula and learned that she had no charitable organization in the U.S. to help her. Since then, Amistad International has been the agency supporting Paula in her multi-faceted program of helping orphans, disabled, handicapped, vulnerable elderly, hydrocephalic babies, and malnourished children.

Jeff: Tell me more about Amistad’s activities today. In what areas of the world are you active, and in what types of programs are you involved?

Karen: Many of the programs we sponsor are schools. Education—literacy—is the first weapon in the arsenal against poverty and institutionalized corruption. Here’s a list of organizations Amistad is supporting around the world:

• Zimbabwe: Murwira orphanage.
• South Africa: Lambano Sanctuary, Johannesberg—a home for children
and babies who are HIV positive.

• **Kenya**: (1) Amri School—currently enrolls 203 impoverished children, many of whom are HIV positive and/or orphans of parents who died of AIDS. (2) Grow BioIntensive Agriculture Center of Kenya (G-BIACK)—teaches at-risk teens and women with AIDS how to grow food for their families, to do tailoring, and make crafts. G-BIACK was given the award as the best NGO in their area in 2013. (3) Pathfinder Academy—a school for 401 children where we have just built 12 classrooms and have a library fully stocked with 4,600 new books. (4) Community Initiatives for Rural Development (CIFORD)—a program for AIDS widows and women with AIDS where we teach agriculture and provide small breeding livestock for their farms. Our work with CIFORD includes three- to six-day sequestered Coming of Age seminars for young girls, teaching them about the dangers of female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as the importance of staying in school and avoiding early marriage. (5) Youth Action for Rural Development (YARD)—Amistad provides funds for about 500 loans in a micro-finance project.

• **India**: (1) Buddha’s Smile School (BSS), Varanasi, India—a school for 220 untouchable caste, lepers’ children, and Bangladeshi refugee children. These are the children of beggars, garbage pickers, rickshaw drivers, etc. We are the primary sponsor for BSS, supplying their month-to-month operations with the exception of the daily meal, which is paid for by a Norwegian group. (2) Calcutta—We are an infrequent sponsor of Soma Home, a home for 40 daughters of sex workers. In 2005, we provided the funds to open the home, but a Spanish NGO is now their main sponsor. We are hoping to help them soon in building a similar home for male children of sex workers in Calcutta.

• **Haiti**: We provide support for two Seventh-day Adventist orthopedic surgeons who serve at the Adventist Hospital of Haiti in Port-au-Prince—Scott Nelson and Terry Dietrich. We also have a new program that helps support four small orphanages.

• **Mongolia**: We have helped various elementary schools.

**Jeff**: How do you see these projects as addressing social injustice?

**Karen**: We focus primarily on the best weapon against poverty: education. Our most successful programs were started by teachers, pastors, or social workers whose great vision and determination inspired them to do what they could to change the world. Each one, though a visionary, is a person of action. Rajan Kaur, in Varanasi, India, is a good example. She was a Montessori school teacher from Calcutta who moved to Varanasi with her new husband 16 years ago. She began teaching rich kids who could afford to pay tuition. Every day, a clutch of ragged children would come to her front yard and beg to be taught, which broke Rajan’s heart. She decided to leave teaching the children of those who could pay, and instead turned her attention to those who could not pay: children of beggars, street sweepers, garbage pickers, and lepers.

She and her husband built a warren of classrooms on a tiny plot of land they owned in Sarnath, and she initially enrolled 60 little children in her Buddha’s Smile School. Now she has 220 students. She has already had 78 go on
to middle school, and about 80 will have graduated as of 2013.

Jeff: Your religious commitment was influential in motivating you to start Amistad. How does your faith shape the organization today?

Karen: Faith that this is God’s work is what keeps me going. It is easy to get discouraged when working in so many areas in the world where poverty can seem to be permanently entrenched because of corruption, greed, lack of electricity, violence, hunger, unsafe water, and inadequate medical delivery systems. But if we all throw up our hands at these issues and walk away, then how will they ever be solved? I see Amistad’s role as linking the rich with the poor to forge ahead, one small step at a time.

Jeff: Many people see “need” as you did in Mexico but don’t start international humanitarian organizations. Why do you think you responded as you did?

Karen: I had no choice. I was by nature and temperament compelled to do this work. I believe many people would like to serve in a more active role. They see a need and genuinely want to do something significant; they just don’t know how. Or in some instances, they mistrust large charities, fearing that their donation will not go where intended.

I see one of Amistad’s most important roles as linking up donors who would probably prefer to be there in the trenches with the people but can’t for a lot of reasons—age, young children, poor health, having to work, no vacation time, etc. Some of Amistad’s donors help support one project and pay special attention to it by communicating with the project leaders and even by visiting on occasion. I keep a very short link between projects. A significant portion of my day is spent writing letters to donors, whom I think of as partners and friends. I’ve developed long-time friendships with many people whom I’ve never actually met. In many instances, donors actually visit their project, which I highly encourage.

Jeff: It seems as if you have a gift for building trust so people know their money will go to those who need it.

Karen: It’s a sacred trust. It really overwhelms me sometimes because I think, “Am I doing enough with Your gifts?” I pray, “Lord, make my mind clear. Tell me. Just tell me.” I hope that doesn’t seem presumptuous, but I do feel that for this time, for this period of my life, God has given me this sacred obligation. I’m very aware that He could take this privilege away tomorrow. But we’ll just do it as long as we can and as well as we can.

Jeff: What advice do you have for young leaders who have a heart for Jesus and His kingdom?

Karen: When young leaders feel called—though I believe that every Christian is called—they cannot let anything stop them from following their God-given path. They will encounter every sort of stumbling block from fear of failure to “the task just seems too big.” Nothing is too big to take on if God is leading. He will give the young leader the power, intelligence, and talents equal to the challenge.

One thing I’d also stress with a young leader is that when massive discouragements come—and they will—to keep putting one foot in front of another. In 1991, our Huichol mission plane crashed, killing all five aboard—our mission pilot (Conroy Donsky), two doctors, and two day visitors. The Inter-American Division (Amistad’s partner in this project) thought they would close the mission aviation program after this tragedy. But our donors generated a letter-writing blizzard to the division, and the Huichol needed our services and wanted us to return, so God helped us rebuild and expanded the program.

A message for young Adventists: Always make your opinions and wishes known to the church leaders. They need to hear from you. And some will listen and help you effect change.

Karen: I would like to serve in a more active role. They see a need and truly want to do something significant; they just don’t know how. Or in some instances, they mistrust large charities, fearing that their donation will not go where intended.

Jeff: How can teachers involve their students in the work of Amistad?

Karen: We have had several schools link with our school in Varanasi, India. They have exchanged artwork and raised funds. If a teacher wanted to ask me about that, we could discuss some ideas, perhaps creating a link to some particular subject they are studying.