

### Wigmore's Supported Charity for 2012-2013

*The Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind*, popularly known as Copota, comprises a primary and secondary boarding school and is home to 480 students with disabilities, most of them with visual impairments. The school is run by the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe, with students drawn from across the whole country and also from Botswana, Mozambique and Malawi. Since the second term in 2011 the school has not received any *Basic Education Assistant Module* funding, which previously covered much of the costs of feeding and educating its students. The school is therefore in immediate need of assistance to help pay utility bills and thus enable day-to-day functions and provision of basic human needs for its students to continue uninterrupted.

Copota is managed by the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe and receives financial and practical support from the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe in the UK, including the congregation worshipping at Wigmore on Sundays after service. The school is normally self supporting through projects such as agriculture, handicrafts and chalk manufacture for schools but now has no money for machinery and materials or building repairs.

You can read more information about Copota below.



# COPOTA School for the Blind



## Foreword

This is an informative report to all well-wishing individuals and organisations to assist the Margaretha Hugo (Copota) School for the Blind raise funds to contribute to the welfare of the residents at the Copota mission. The institution is managed by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and has been in existence for more than 60 years. Due to financial challenges the centre is now struggling to sustain its self and is at risk of closure. This undoubtedly will have devastating consequences to visually impaired students and the disabled residents in Copota. This appeal is an attempt to raise awareness of the dire situation at Copota as well as to mobilise support, in whatever means, for this very important institution in the Zimbabwean society. Above all it is important that Copota is self sufficient, to ensure that it does not rely on direct external financial injections for its day to day management and welfare of residents. It is hoped that with financial support, from the international community, Copota will be able to continue supporting the visually impaired.

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## 1. History of Copota School for the Blind

The "Reformed" movement was well established in the 1500s by its promoters Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli among others. Since then the movement has been growing. In Zimbabwe on the 9<sup>th</sup> September 1890 Rev A.A. Louw founded the Reformed Church at Morgenster Mission in Masvingo. The Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind, popularly known as Copota, was established in 1915 by the Reformed Church missionary – Mrs Hugo, to support the under privileged in the Zimbabwean society. Despite its initial focus being the Zimbabwean society, the centre has been supporting the visually impaired across Southern Africa, drawing from countries such as Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia and Malawi. Copota is comprised of a primary and a secondary boarding school and is home to 480 students with disabilities, most of them with visual impairments. Of this number, 180 are primary school children, and the numbers keep rising. The school continues to be managed by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) with students drawn from the whole country and beyond. The school is situated about 20kms out of Masvingo, Zimbabwe.



The school which is presently supported by a staff complement of 35 primary and 14 secondary school teachers and a number of general workers was founded by Mrs Margaretha Hugo. Mrs Hugo was an evangelist from Germany hence the name Margaretha Hugo School of the blind. The institution was



initially established in the Chivi Communal Lands, 50km to South West of Masvingo, when a man, unable to cater for his family and his blind child, instructed his wife to drown the child. The wife, who had been told of a certain missionary, Reverend Hugo, who was in the area at the time, approached the reverend for help. The reverend asked his wife if she was able to take in the blind child and look after him. Her reply was: “I will try”. From this famous saying was born the motto of Margareta Hugo Mission soon, Margareta Hugo had 8 children under her wing at Chivi and she went to South Africa and Zambia to learn how to teach Braille. Margareta Hugo Primary School for the Blind was born! Established in 1915, it was registered as a school in 1927. But, because Chivi was hilly and inaccessible, the school was moved to Copota in 1938 where it is currently situated.



## 2. Management of the School

The school is managed by a team of professional teachers and the bulk of financial support is provided by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ). The Zimbabwean government used to support the School through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) funding to cater for the costs of feeding and educating its students. However the Zimbabwean government is struggling to provide this support hence the burden has wholly been assumed by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The prevailing economic climate in Zimbabwe means that even the RCZ is struggling to mobilise the pertinent resources for Copota’s sustainability.

The school has been supported by a number of income generating projects and these have previously been vital for its self sustenance. From the income from these projects, the School has been able to raise finance for paying salaries for the workers, most of whom are skilled graduates from the school. The profits from these projects have also been utilised in paying for food, clothing and various other administrative expenses. Although the proceeds from the projects are not enough to meet the school’s requirements, the school, true to its motto, is doing the best it can with scarce resources.





### 3. Income generating projects

Over many decades the school has relied on income generating projects such as agriculture, which comprises animal husbandry, piggery, poultry and market gardening; art and craft, which comprises weaving, and basketry and educational chalk production. The school is now facing persistent challenges, especially on the viability of the above projects and this has had adverse effects on the smooth operation of the centre. The survival of the centre has been challenged to core, with the ultimate threat being its closure. It is unclear at present how the families and students at Copota will survive if the facility was to close. Especially that most of the residents are either orphans or have no other means of survival outside of the Copota's facilities. As explained below the centre has relied on a number of support streams, however these have now either been suspended or simply dried up. Below, we explore on some of them.

#### a) Government Support

Educational support funds from the Zimbabwean government (BEAM) were last paid to the school at the beginning of the second term of 2011, since then the school has not received any funding and it is not known if and when the payment will be made.

#### b) Projects

Incoming generating projects such as those mentioned above were an important source of income at one point or another. They have now ground to a halt because the school has consumed the capital invested in the projects in order to feed the students. The school management had to make a decision to use the capital and proceeds from the projects to stave off the marauding perils of hunger especially in the period between 2006 and 2009, when the Zimbabwean economy was in the doll drums. This has destroyed any hopes of reviving the centres sustainable survival without fresh capital injections.

One of the centre's main source of income – Chalk manufacture, the chalk is used for educational purposes, in most Zimbabwean Schools is no longer viable. The Chalk was creating health risks hence the institution needed to change its equipment but this could not be achieved since the capital had been spent in food supplies. A switch of preference to dustless chalk by the teaching profession has left Copota with a stockpile of dust chalk that they cannot sell. Copota has not been able to raise the capital to invest in equipment that would enable it to produce dustless chalk; the skilled workers and students have been unproductive thus the centre could not continue with this project. A dustless chalk manufacturing machine costs an estimated £3,000.



### c) Donor Community

Over the years the centre has come to rely on funding from external donors especially in the Netherlands. Local partners such as private companies offer their support from time to time, recently they donated bedding equipment. Their support is often not enough to support the centre's population which has always been on the rise. The centre has also had to decline some students due to its constrained budgets, this is particularly sad given its mission.

Our congregation here in the UK (Reformed Church Zimbabwe – International) has been working tirelessly to mobilise clothing and financial support for Copota. These efforts have culminated in the donation of more than £3000.00 and 6 drums of clothing. Although the aid is well appreciated by the School, in the context of the prevailing situation at Copota this could be considered as a 'drop in the ocean'. The URC Wigmore church is promised financial support, which is greatly appreciated.

Recently, the School had their electricity turned off due to non payment of bills. We hope that some of the financial donation from the Reformed Church at Wigmore will be used to pay off the utility bills and alleviate vital supplies shortages at the Copota.

## 4. Conclusion

It is possible to sustain capital with new financial injections. This calls for the international and local community to work together to support the needy at Copota. The initial intentions for setting up Copota are charitable. The love and support that's been shown over the years in helping the Copota community survive has shown us that love conquers everything. We should all think deeply, about what else we could do to help the school which is facing an imminent closure. Due to lack of funding the school struggles to meet its operational obligations and to provide and maintain a basic standard of living for the students. In the short and long term the school needs immediate assistance with funding for food and income generating projects to ensure Copota is self sufficient. The school has indicated that it could be assisted by way of a donor sponsoring an element of its budget for a period of time to relieve pressure from its limited resources, however we see the ultimate objective being to mobilise support so that in the long term Copota is self sufficient. This could be in the form of structured donor funding for certain periods of time while the RCZ and private financiers work with the centre to address these challenges and develop credible systems for ensuring the proper functioning of the centre without needing constant financial intervention. Currently, the school has arrears in excess of \$US 54,000 for electricity bills which have not been paid for a considerable period of time.



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