



Courtesy, Engineering Ministries International Canada

Project leader Kevin Wiens, a Calgary civil engineer, poses with Ugandan children on the future site of a leadership training school.

# Engineering a better world for the poor

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The fog of jet lag from the long return flight from Uganda was still evident in Kevin Wiens' face.

But the project leader for Engineering Ministries International Canada (EMI) was crystal clear when asked why he does what he does.

"It's a life-altering experience. It changes you emotionally forever," said Wiens of the work of the organization, which takes Christian design professionals — engineers, architects, surveyors and the like — to Third World locales to use their talents in a unique, practical ministry.

EMI was launched 27 years ago in the U.S. and now has six offices around the world. The Canadian branch opened in January, 2003, and is based out of a modest, second-storey office which overlooks Calgary's Bowness Road.

The organization assembles teams of six to 10 cross-denominational Christians from the design professions and matches them with missionary groups and faith-based organizations who want to build facilities in developing countries. The professionals pay their own airfare and often use vacation time to volunteer for EMI missions.

In northern Uganda, Wiens' team prepared a topographical survey and produced conceptual drawings for a vocational centre planned by a group called Connect Africa. The

complex will train leaders from nearby refugee camps in sustainable technologies for agriculture, locally produced water filters and improved sanitation. Other EMI projects have included designing schools, clinics, orphanages and churches.

Teams spend eight or nine days overseas, working at a breakneck pace around intense rain squalls to get the crucial groundwork in. Back in Canada, they help create the detailed working drawings, often suggesting a phased development as funds become available, which are supplied to the faith-based organizations when they're ready to break ground.

And it's all done free of charge. Steve Ulrich, director of EMI's Canadian operations and the staff architect, estimates the work the teams accomplish in a week would be valued in the \$60,000 range for a similar project in Canada.

"Our mandate is to go where we're asked and serve the poorest of the poor," says Ulrich. "We've all come from the secular professional world and been attracted by this chance to use our skills to serve a different master."

Ulrich says EMI takes pains to ensure their teams are in as safe an environment as possible, given that they are sent to some of the world's most dangerous countries.

When on site, EMI teams are housed in modest hotels or even in tents. They worship with the locals on Sundays, hold daily devotionals and get the chance to



Calgary-based surveyor David Marquardt draws a crowd of observers while working on the site of a future orphanage in Haiti.

interact with the people the buildings they are designing will eventually serve.

David Marquardt, a project manager for Calgary's Midwest Surveys, has volunteered for four EMI Canada projects.

"As a Christian, I was searching for a way to use my professional talents for the benefit of my fellow man," says Marquardt. He experienced his personal spiritual epiphany in Haiti while surveying for an orphanage in one of the world's poorest nations.

"When you get to meet these kids, when you hold some of these tiny little orphaned babies in your arms, it really tears at your heart," says Marquardt. "It makes you realize how lucky we are to live in Canada and how the vast majority of our complaints are so trivial."

Michael Fryer, a mechanical engineering student at the University of Victoria, joined Wiens' team in Uganda last month. He'll help prepare the working drawings in the coming weeks as part of his internship with EMI.

"I was the rodman for

the surveyor after they had 'de-snake-ified' the area, if that's a word," Fryer recalls with a laugh. "As a student, it was a great opportunity to work with a multi-disciplinary team on a real project."

For Wiens, a civil engineer by trade, part of EMI's attraction is the chance to work with Christians from many denominations.

"I'm from a Mennonite background, but in a team of six or eight you can get people from just as many churches," says Wiens. "When you're working side-by-side in the jungle, there are no denominational lines."

Since 1981, the international EMI movement has worked on an estimated 800 projects in 27 countries. Ulrich says the Canadian office hopes to continue to co-ordinate six to eight trips a year, despite the global economic recession.

"There's just so much need out there that can't wait," he says.

More information on the organization is available at [www.emicanada.org](http://www.emicanada.org).

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