

From Small Things -- Rob Robertson

One good thing about attending Church is that it may be one of the few times during the week when we think big thoughts. On other days many of our concerns may be small and transitory, involving just day-to-day issues with family and friends and co-workers. But on Sundays, we must think about our faith, our place in the world, and helping our neighbour. We must confess that many big issues are simply beyond us. Take the universe; it's ninety-one billion light years across, and it's still expanding. Still expanding...as Christians we may wonder why God wants more space. And there are still over a billion people in our world living in poverty. In a world of abundance, as Christians we wonder why this happens and what we can do about it. This Sunday we cannot discern why the universe is so big. But we can discern how, in our corner of it, we can help our global neighbours as an expression of our faith.

Certainly there have been many ideas about how to promote international development. How can the peoples of the north best help the peoples of the developing south? Decade after decade, new solutions have been offered by experts. There was the Green Revolution, designed to banish world hunger. There was the view that instituting good governance practices is the one key to social and economic progress; or, that better education of girls is also the one key to achieving social and economic progress. And there have been periods

when the fundamental requirement for all progress was said to be forgiving national debt, or was it preserving the environment.

Now some of these ideas may be true; maybe they're all true in their way. And there has been considerable progress in many developing countries. But we still spend vast sums trying to find out what works best. International development aid by all countries now amounts to one hundred and sixty billion dollars a year. That's more than half of the entire annual budget of the Government of Canada. If I had one hundred and sixty billion dollars every year to spend on development, how would I spend it most effectively? That's just one more big thing that I don't know.

What then as Canadian Presbyterians should we think about our own capacity to do good in the developing world that confronts so many problems? What is our capacity to make a difference with our annual PWS&D budget of about four million dollars, a small thimble-full of cash in this big sea of money?

Of course Christians turn to the scriptures to answer our most basic questions. But, we must confess that the scriptures don't overflow with answers to many of the things we would like to understand. Jesus did not explain the expanding universe to his followers. And as for economic and political issues, His discussion of them is sufficiently general that present day Christians hold widely divergent views based on the same scriptures. But all Christians believe that we can learn from

the Scriptures what we need to know. How do the Scriptures help Christians to understand our responsibilities to the peoples of the developing countries? How can we deploy our small resources and make a big difference?

I've chosen as our scripture this morning the well-known parable of the mustard seed. Many people preaching on international development do. The mustard seed wasn't a seed that farmers planted in their gardens. It just grew in the fields. But Jesus chose it for His parable to illustrate how something small and undervalued can grow and serve...grow not for its own sake, but for the sake of the birds of the air, giving them a place to rest, to observe, to recover...a place for them to be.

Scholars usually interpret this parable to represent the power of faith, the spread of the Kingdom, and the growth of the Church. From its small and humble beginnings, Christ knew that Christianity would flourish and grow in the world, standing as a tall and welcoming faith, giving to us a place to shelter and to recover from lives spent up in the air. Our Church's support for international development mirrors that vision of the small becoming big, of modest investments making a difference in people's lives, of giving people a better and safer home.

I want to begin my description of some PWS&D activities with an example of how we help people to rest and recover. It's in Ghana in West Africa. I visited Ghana many years ago and I encountered a welcoming and friendly and openly religious nation. And yet, it contains

some sinister elements. After a crop failure or the death of a child or other unexplained event, some communities suspect witchcraft as the reason, with disastrous results for the women involved. Based on malicious rumour or the fantastic dream of a child, a woman can be called a witch, subjected to abuse, and forced to flee to a camp for outcasts. And there they find the results of the mustard seeds that you and I have sown. Working with the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, we have given them access to vocational training for themselves, and elementary schooling for their children. And in their home villages we support education about human rights, respect for women, and knowledge about the health problems people once thought were caused by witches. Sometimes it takes years, but eventually many women can return to their homes, their families and their communities. What a big thing we are accomplishing with our small contribution.

And what about other small investments? I asked two PWS&D program officers to think of some good examples of small investments making a big difference. Both women thought of experiences in Malawi. One arose in a sustainable livelihoods project. A woman named Sara was loaned five dollars. She invested it in a small retail business and netted two dollars. With this small profit she bought a set of dishes. It meant that each member of her family could now have their own plate rather than eating from a common pot, thus improving her family's hygiene. Just a five dollar investment significantly improved one family's health.

In a second project, dealing with maternal and child health, there is a component that teaches men about pregnancies. One small element deals with cravings. Men have typically thought this was just an excuse to have expensive food. As a result of our training, the men now understand that cravings are a natural part of pregnancy and go out to buy what is craved. Thanks to a very small investment, discord in families has been reduced.

Now I am not advocating that we donate only small amounts to PWS&D, but we have identified many small gifts that will make a big difference as part of our Gifts of Change program...for eight dollars you can buy a farmer some garden tools...for twelve dollars buy a mosquito net to prevent malaria...for fifty-four dollars train one volunteer to care for an AIDS sufferer. Donations of this kind can be made directly through the Gifts of Change page at the PWS&D web site.

This is not to say that all PWS&D projects are small. Great challenges sometimes require great efforts. I was fortunate enough to travel for three weeks in Malawi in central Africa for PWS&D. It is poor, ranking number 173 on the list of countries in terms of the wealth of the people. It's the country where fully one half of PWS&D's development money is spent; a country where we Presbyterians have many historical bonds. And I can assure you that our support is directed at the poorest of the poor. In fact, it sometimes seemed to me that the people we are helping are beyond poor.

Set on a scorched landscape where rivers have become dried up river beds, children rise each morning with nothing to face but the same bleak day, running around, with no programs or resources or toys. Some schools were so poor there were no chairs or desks or chalkboards...just a teacher left to her own resources.

And of course, there is death...high rates of mothers dying during pregnancy or at child birth...and high rates of child mortality. In Malawi, one in every one hundred pregnant women die, and you may have to beat those odds many times over because you may be pregnant often. And nearly three in every one hundred babies die. These women and children are victims of a high rate of adolescent pregnancies, unskilled birth attendants, and poor emergency care. Into these appalling circumstances we introduced a project financed by you...through the Government of Canada and through PWS&D.

This project supported community organizers to teach about good nutrition and early warning signs in pregnancy. Groups were formed for men to learn about their responsibilities to their wives and newborns. Women were encouraged to move into hospitals weeks before their delivery dates and when that didn't happen they were provided with bicycle ambulances to get them to the hospital for delivery. In the hospitals safe and private delivery rooms have been built and good quality neo-natal care given. The death rates have dropped dramatically. In some project sites there have been no deaths at all, and in others the numbers are well below the national average. A second phase of this project is now underway in Malawi, where women

and children are receiving essential immunizations, being screened for malnutrition, and where everyone is learning about respectful gender roles. A comparable project is underway in Afghanistan where as you can imagine much work is needed in empowering girls and women and ensuring that their good health is a priority. How often can any of us point to actually saving people's lives? But together, through PWS&D, we can point to saving many lives in such projects and truly carrying out the gospel's call for social justice.

PWS&D is also the agency of our church that co-ordinates our sponsorship of refugees. It oversees the application process, and tells us about best practices to sponsor refugees. Over the years PWS&D has helped many congregations to support the displaced of the world as they build new and decent homes. To refugees, their sponsorship by churches has been a life-altering event, not just for them but for subsequent generations. And it is all built on the thousands of small contributions that Christians have made to support PWS&D's capacity to work in this area, plus the generosity shown at the congregational level.

Let me share with you some recent trends. In 2017 Presbyterian churches submitted 78 applications to sponsor 176 individuals and it will be about the same number this year. That still leaves many congregations wanting to sponsor refugees right now but unable to do so because of government quotas. As for nationalities, a large majority of the refugees now being resettled by our congregations are Syrians, but a majority of those coming this year will be from at least 12 other countries.

I know that we are all proud of the way our church has responded to this refugee crisis, and the fact it has been done efficiently and thoughtfully is a great credit to PWS&D and its dedicated staff.

And, it is PWS&D that answers calls for relief after natural or man-made disasters around the world. There is an old Irish saying “Eaten bread is soon forgotten.” Indeed, there can be a tension in international work between devoting resources to relief to satisfy current needs, or devoting them to long-term development interventions with lasting visibility and impact. Nevertheless, the scriptures clearly support feeding the hungry, and giving them resources that are “sufficient unto the day.” Christ urged us to live in the present, and that means responding to very present needs. As drought sweeps through east and central Africa, I’ve seen the large bags of corn and other nutritious food we provide to thousands of hungry people no longer able to provide for themselves. But our responses are not limited to just providing food, shelter and medicines. We also provide counselling to overcome the trauma that victims have experienced, and help in re-building and recovering their livelihoods.

Mariah and her daughter live in the heart of a civil war in South Sudan. After four years of bitter violence, nearly two million citizens have fled from their homes and are searching for safety. Mass displacement, crop failure, the loss of livestock, and looting have reduced parts of South Sudan to a wasteland and left people like Mariah and her daughter facing famine. But Mariah’s daughter was admitted to a feeding centre supported by PWS&D that provided malnutrition treatment for children

under the age of five, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers. Weekly rations of special therapeutic food brought new strength to the little girl, while Mariah participated in a support group for mothers where she learned about ensuring good health and proper nutrition for her daughter. In about a month, her daughter's weight was in the normal range. A very relieved Mariah said, "Without this program, my child might have died." Working within the framework of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, many such nutrition feeding centres have been established and will benefit benefit forty-two thousand people.

And more recently we have provided support to over six hundred thousand Rohingya people who have fled persecution in Burma and are now in Bangladesh.

Even in our own country, PWS&D has been the agency that received a quarter of a million dollars in an effective and responsive way to Fort McMurray when Presbyterians across the country donated to help those affected by the wild fires.

Our churches have all been caught up in the issues of refugees from the Middle East. But PWS&D also plays a vital part in providing relief to those who stay behind. The United Nations reports that the number of refugees uprooted from Syria has surpassed four million—over half of these refugees are children. Of course, we cannot begin to help most of them. But we can help some of them. One of our programs provides food vouchers to Syrians who have fled to Lebanon.

One of the men we help named Abdel says, "I am not allowed to work here. Without the vouchers, my family would have nothing to eat. You have wide hands. Thank you for not forgetting us." Could there be any other situation where the Golden Rule applies more forcefully than these. Imagine ourselves as the victims of uncontrollable circumstances, where we are without shelter and food and medicine. And then recognize the excellent networks of support to which PWS&D belongs in Canada and around the world that can effectively do for others what we would want for ourselves.

Let me make one last reference to a way that you can help PWS&D continue to respond abundantly to all of these opportunities for service. We have a fund called the Loaves and Fishes fund that receives legacy gifts through wills and life insurance policies. It's not one of those funds where donations languish. Instead, every year, one dollar in seven is spent by PWS&D on our programs. Please consider this fund as you consider your own legacy to our church. It is a way for large donations to sustain our operations at a consistent level. Details about it can be found on our web site.

There are many big things we'll never know...why the universe needs more space, or how to solve every problem in the developing world. But, we are blessed in knowing as much as we need to know to act in a faithful and effective way toward our global neighbours. We know that through doing small things, through our generosity, people's lives will be made better. In many cases, in most cases, you and I won't see the

result. But just as the early Christians sowed their small mustard seeds confidently knowing that a Church and a faith would grow from them, so we can confidently make our own contributions to PWS&D, knowing that in our small way we are truly accomplishing big things and advancing the Kingdom. Please share with your families, your neighbours and your colleagues this good news about what your Church is accomplishing in Christ's name.