

The Strength of Many Hands
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The biblical challenge to share good news with the poor requires the strength of many hands.

Through Presbyterian World Service and Development or PWS&D, the hands of Presbyterians across Canada join with the hands of partners around the world to work for a better world, a world where everyone has enough and nobody lives in fear. With the strength of many hands – joined together, working together – we continue the ministry of Christ to share good news with the poor.

I have been the BC Synod representative for the PWS&D committee for just over a year and I see the work we do through PWS&D as an integral part of my faith.

PWS&D has been the Presbyterian response to issues of global concern for almost sixty years. Working with local partners in more than 20 countries, PWS&D works against poverty, responds to emergencies, protects refugees and educates and advocates for change.

PWS&D partners in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Canada are rooted in their own communities, and know how to best meet people's needs in their local context. These partners maintain very low administrative costs. A multitude of volunteers from within the communities work to maximize efficiency and give communities ownership of the work. By working through local partners, PWS&D empowers people to respond to poverty and disasters in their own countries. Every day, in circumstances often far more difficult than our own, PWS&D partners demonstrate courage and creativity in their response to the challenges of their own environment. PWS&D gives us – Presbyterians across Canada – an opportunity to join hands with our partners to:

- repair lives ruptured by years of conflict,
- tend to traumatized children
- restore dignity and self-reliance,
- create new futures for refugees,
- and deliver life-giving necessities to people caught in crisis.

Hands, working and creative, help restore dignity and self-reliance.

Hands, sunk deep in the earth, work long hours in hundreds of home gardens throughout northern Nicaragua.

The hands coax peppers, pineapple, bananas, plantain, onions, and tomatoes out of the hard ground. They know hard work. These hands have survived war in the 1980s and lost their homes and land in Hurricane Mitch. They have built new homes, on new land, but continue to struggle, especially with the onslaught of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

PWS&D partner SOYNICA is helping families in rural communities in northern Nicaragua improve their food security. Nutritionists work with families to help them learn the importance of a varied diet – and the benefits of a variety of fruits and vegetables. Agronomists meet with families and help map out their dreams for their land – and then help make them come true with agricultural methods that use locally available inputs to improve the land and harvest. New seed helps the families grow a variety of crops on their land. Wells and cisterns help nurture early crops in an area that too often knows drought.

The scale of the gardens is small – but the value is large. The diversity in the food available to the families is significantly improving their nutrition, and the income families earn from selling fruits and vegetables in the markets allows them to send their children to school, buy clothes, and improve their homes.

Hands, hard working and creative, are helping families restore their dignity and self-reliance.

Hands, loving and gentle, tend to vulnerable children.

Shauri Yako is a small rural community located in Nyeri Kenya, 250km north of Nairobi. About 75% of the residents in Nyeri live below the poverty line. The district has the highest number of landless people displaced

by tribal clashes in Kenya. A lack of farmland and employment opportunities contributes to a perpetual cycle of poverty and despair. The poor economy, coupled with the AIDS pandemic, has resulted in a large number of orphans and youth who have dropped out of school, are unemployed and/or are working on the streets.

Each day, with the help of PWS&D, the Shauri Yako Community Centre provides meals for 60 young children who are orphans or work on the streets. Youth on the street know if you go to the centre, you won't go away hungry. But the center does more than just nourish the body – it also nourishes the soul. Here the children do arts, crafts, organized sports and other fun activities. Volunteer counselors work with the youth to help them change destructive behaviours and attitudes that come from the combination of high unemployment, hopelessness and boredom. It's a tough job. Many of the youth have been involved in petty crime and drug abuse. But the centre is finding that loving and gentle hands can make a difference.

Kids on the Shauri Yako soccer team are thriving. The team makes them feel like they belong, and gives them a sense of self-worth. They take the energy from the team and are using it to help others. One of the projects they are working on is cleaning up the banks of the Nyeri River. A place bustling with activity, many people use the river for their drinking water and to wash their clothes. But the stagnant river is contaminated with garbage – making it unpleasant and posing a major threat for waterborne diseases. The Shauri Yako Centre youth are helping clean up the river banks, sorting and recycling the garbage.

Loving and gentle hands nourish the body and soul of youth who have long been abandoned by everyone else – and give them hope.

Hands spread open wide, help create new futures.

Paw Ray is from the Karen tribe in Burma. As a Karen living in Burma (now called Myanmar), Paw Ray knew persecution, violence, discrimination, and forced labour. She saw her home burned, fled fighting in her community and endured years separated from her family. But hands – spread open wide – helped her reunite with her family and begin a new life.

Sleeping Giant Refugee Committee – an ecumenical refugee group based at First Presbyterian Church Thunder Bay – helped Paw Ray and her family begin new futures in Canada. Paw ray's eldest son, Winning, was the first to arrive in 1996. Paw Ray, her son Run Nay, and three daughters Mulu, Emily and Prezana were sponsored next, arriving in November 2000. By 2002, their entire family was reunited. They were so happy to be safe, and to be together again.

The people of the Sleeping Giant Refugee Committee helped the family find housing and furniture, obtain health cards, register for school, complete complicated paperwork and find jobs. They provided friendship and support through the resettlement process. Through the Presbyterian Church in Canada, congregations across Canada have spread their hands open wide to help refugees, from some of the most troubled places in the world, begin futures of hope.

Hands calloused and tough, deliver life-giving necessities to communities in times of crisis.

Rev. Nadarajah Arulnathan knows the bitter taste of disaster. On December 26, 2004 he lost his sister and 18 other relatives to the Tsunami that devastated the coast of Sri Lanka. For this Methodist pastor, the sea is now something to fear. But he didn't take time to stop and reflect on the devastating impact of the giant waves on his family – there was too much to do.

From early in the morning, until late at night, Rev. Arulnathan worked organizing the relief efforts of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka in the Batticola region. Churches were transformed into refuges for the homeless – packed with people sleeping on thin mats on the bare floor. Having no time to grab anything, simply fleeing for their lives, they were left with nothing but the clothes they were wearing.

Within hours of the disaster, the Christian Council began purchasing emergency supplies and dispatching trucks with food, water, clothing, medicine, and cooking pots to the hard hit eastern coastline, where local congregations of the Anglican, Methodist, and Church of South India churches took charge of distributing them to affected families.

Rev. Arulnathan is pleased that nothing beyond logistical challenges stood in the way of relief efforts in the area – not caste, not ethnicity, not people's religious affiliations. "People helped each other," he says, describing how Muslims, Buddhists and Christians all worked together to respond to the emergency.

It is hands like Rev. Arulnathan and Sri Lankans around him calloused and tough, that deliver life-giving necessities to communities in times of crisis.

On my trip to Africa last February, we took part in a food distribution in three Sukoma tribe villages near Shinyanga in the Kishapu District of Tanzania. Sukoma men are bound to their land because working it is a way of honouring their ancestors. The Sukoma people have gone through two years of drought and this year's harvest had not yet come. We helped with distributing maize/corn, beans, sorghum seed and hand hoes. People who were not able to write would sign with their thumbprint to say they had received their goods. The sorghum seeds would be planted and harvested and then 20% of that seed would be returned to a seed bank to help the next set of farmers in need.

In Usa River, Tanzania, in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, our hands were the car seats for four abandoned or orphaned babies who were being brought to a medical clinic to be tested for HIV. Thankfully, all their tests came out negative.

There is so much more I would like to share about what I saw and experienced, but we would be here all day. There was a poster I saw near the end of my time in Africa that tied many things together for me. It was a poster about HIV/AIDS and its impacts on everyday life and community. The striking thing to me was that it wasn't from the Ministry of Health or even Education, as I expected. This poster about HIV/AIDS was produced by the Ministry of Agriculture. My time in Kenya and Tanzania focused on agriculture and food projects, but in the background, the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic could be seen everywhere. There are not enough people to farm because they are sick or looking after family members who are sick. Girls are pulled out of school to look after sick family members. Children are losing their parents. One school in Kenya lost all its teachers in one year and Kenya is not producing enough teachers to make up for all the ones that are lost. Countries are losing their work force because the highest rates of HIV infection are in 18 – 45 year olds. We met several women who have lost sons and daughters to AIDS and are now raising their grandchildren. Several of the babies we took to be tested for HIV are orphans because their parents have died of AIDS. That is the sobering reality of HIV/AIDS in Africa. It affects everyone and permeates into everything.

Consider our hands.

You have helped all the people in these stories with your hands through the gifts you as individuals and as a congregation have given to PWS&D through regular giving, appeals, the Towards a World without AIDS Campaign and projects like Something Extra. Your hands help in the ministries of your church, with international students, a monthly community breakfast and hummingbird ministries to name just a few.

The hands of Jesus were always stretched out to others – healing the afflicted, reaching out to the outcast and active in resisting oppression. Following the resurrection, his followers recognized him by the marks of suffering on his hands.

Christ's hands reach out to us and beckon us to follow him – to proclaim good news to the poor. Let us consider our hands, join them together and offer them

folded in prayer, open in offering
raised in resistance, extended in friendship,
and firm in the grip of partnership
as we work for the kingdom of God. Amen.