

Chapter 11

Building Bridges of
Understanding through
Church Humanitarian Assistance

Garry R. Flake

MANY OF YOU have had such extensive experience in many countries throughout the world. We are here because of our interest to see the influence of the gospel expand to these people we love. The humanitarian effort of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is part of the whole effort of expansion. It is a way of helping the needy of the world and, at the same time, increasing awareness of the Church. We are interested—through humanitarian services of the Church—in helping to build bridges of understanding wherever we can. I would like to respond to the most common questions we receive about Church humanitarian work.

Why is the Church involved in providing worldwide humanitarian assistance?

Foremost, the Church provides assistance simply for the good it does. Our Christian giving demonstrates that the gospel is a gospel of love. Spiritual and temporal well-being results for both the giver and the receiver. An important benefit for the Church, where feasible,

is to help open doors of nations that have been closed to the Church and its message.

How extensive is Church humanitarian aid?

Church humanitarian aid has tripled in the last five years. This, of course, is due to the generosity of members and friends of the Church who sustain this effort with cash and in-kind donations. Assistance was provided in over one hundred countries last year in about fifteen hundred different projects. Literally millions have been blessed.

What is the focus of Church humanitarian aid?

The focus continues to be on providing life-sustaining goods as emergency response to an increasing number of disasters. Humanitarian Services is part of the inspired Welfare Services program of the Church. The focus of Welfare Services has always been to help people become more self-reliant and to provide effective temporary assistance as needed.

Humanitarian emergency response has the unique ability to draw quickly on the resources of the Bishops' Storehouse Services and Deseret Industries. With the immediate availability of organized labor, needed goods can be packaged for shipment in a matter of hours. These two organizations, coupled with a worldwide Church organization ready to receive goods and quickly distribute them, enhances Church response to any disaster. The Church is recognized worldwide as a premier emergency relief agency.

In 2002 the Church delivered in-kind assistance directly to needy flood victims in Chile, to those affected by mammoth forest fires in Arizona, to those severely affected by a devastating typhoon on the remote Chuuk Island in the Pacific, and to members and others on the brink of starvation due to drought in Southern Africa. It has actively participated with many local and national governments in Central Europe to provide aid in response to extensive flooding.

In addition to emergency response, what else does the Church do to assist the needy not of our faith?

Since the Church emphasizes helping people help themselves, there are humanitarian missionary couples currently serving in approximately thirty countries. Development projects are focused on the skills of missionary couples who share their expertise. This has included laboratory technologists improving the blood bank services in Mongolia and dentists who trained instructors in a dental school in Peru. The Church has established food-processing training programs at universities in Cambodia and Syria. There is English and vocational teacher training in many countries.

Hundreds of tons of used clothing and donated medical and educational supplies are distributed each year. Humanitarian missionary couples, among other assignments, ensure these donations reach the needy. Their field presence reduces theft and misuse.

What is the relationship of Church Humanitarian Services and Latter-day Saint Charities?

All Church humanitarian effort is given without regard to race or religion. Latter-day Saint Charities is the registered nongovernmental agency of the Church. It is a delivery agency. The primary focus is on the Church as the donor agency, whenever possible. However, there are countries where the Church is not officially recognized, but Latter-day Saint Charities has been registered. Latter-day Saint Charities also allows often improved access to other international agencies.

Does the Church work with partnership organizations?

Yes. Over the last decade, the Church has collaborated with over five hundred local and international organizations and agencies, drawing on their strengths to deliver goods and services. The Church has always had a good relationship with the Red Cross. It works closely with Catholic Relief Services and other faith-based

organizations. There has been a unique partnership with the Wheelchair Foundation, providing nearly ten thousand wheelchairs to those who cannot afford them in fourteen countries. These have been provided through the First Lady's charitable organization in most locations. There has been favorable public recognition, but the most important result is providing mobility to individuals who otherwise would be homebound.

Church humanitarian aid desires full participation with partnering agencies. It does not want to only be a funding source.

How are Church humanitarian efforts financed?

Church members have been generous in their support of Church humanitarian aid. Many friends of the Church participate as well. Contrary to the practice of so many other organizations, there is no pressure and no funding campaigns. Every donation is an individual, voluntary initiative. In addition, as President Gordon B. Hinckley explained in a general conference session, LDS Philanthropies also supports the Church humanitarian cause.

What is the overhead cost, and who pays it?

The Church, from its general budgeted funds, covers the minimal overhead costs that occur. This allows every donated humanitarian dollar to go to those being assisted. Since there is such an extensive volunteer effort, the overhead is very low—far below that of most other humanitarian organizations.

How else do members of the Church support humanitarian efforts?

Literally thousands of hygiene, school, and newborn kits are prepared and brought to the Church humanitarian center. Many are made by individuals and families. Since the Kosovo refugee crisis in the spring of 1999, over two hundred thousand quilts have

been donated. Thousands of tons of clothing come through regular Deseret Industries donations.

Recently the leadership of the Gresham Oregon South Stake thought if the Lord could feed five thousand, stake members could make five thousand hygiene, school, and newborn kits. They applied for an eight-thousand-dollar grant from Church humanitarian funds to purchase materials, then multiplied the value many times over. One Relief Society sister sewed 117 infant blankets. Another sister in a retirement home with arthritic hands slowly crocheted 100 pairs of baby booties. Two Laurel girls who had never sewn before made 250 blankets. The stake president reported, "As with the loaves and fishes, the true miracle was manifested in the lives of our stake members that were changed forever. We want the approximately ten thousand children who receive these kits to know of our love for them, whoever and wherever they are."

Does the Church assist Muslims?

Yes. Church humanitarian aid is provided throughout the world to those in need, regardless of race or religion. The Church is balanced in its assistance, helping Muslim, Christian, and Jew alike.

The Church provided substantial support following the earthquakes in Turkey. Nearly one hundred thousand hygiene kits were prepared in Indonesia in partnership with an Islamic humanitarian organization for Timorese refugees. Church members and Muslims worked jointly in assembling these kits. With the focus on those in need, the result was more tolerance and understanding, touching the lives of both givers and receivers.

The Church has worked with several partnering organizations in Jordan and in Egypt. The expertise of humanitarian missionary couples has been well received in Pakistan, Syria, and other Islamic countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Humanitarian initiatives are just part of the whole as the Church continues to extend a hand of friendship to the Islamic world.

Church humanitarian aid continues to demonstrate a gospel of love and a caring attitude for those in need throughout the world. It is part of building bridges of understanding.

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