



+ FEATURE

Water + Gospel = transformation

AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY FOR THE GLOBAL CHURCH

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THE LAST UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS IN THE WORLD WILL ONLY BE REACHED BY THE LOVE OF GOD AS WE ADDRESS PHYSICAL NEEDS—THE FIRST OF THEM BEING WATER.”

— Dick Eastman, President, Every Home for Christ.



When we were children, we drank from mud holes, and many of our brothers and sisters died from it,” said Kunguru. “Our children will never know this kind of suffering, praise the Lord.” I was sitting with a group of Maasai women near a recently installed water system, under the acacia tree by a tin-roofed church in Kenya’s Rift Valley. I had come to listen to their stories and learn what it meant to lack access to safe water. That day, a decade ago, would be the first of many such conversations, and one that would always stay with me. That was the day I realized for myself that something as simple as clean water can be a sign of God’s kingdom.

A CLEAR NEED

You have probably seen sobering statistics about the effects of poor water access. At any one time, half the hospital beds in the world are filled with people suffering from water-related diseases—diseases that are responsible for 2.2 million deaths each year. Children are particularly vulnerable; diarrhea caused by poor water and sanitation is the number one killer of children under the age of five in sub-Saharan Africa.

The health impact of poor water access may be the most obvious, but there is much more to it than that. Education suffers, as 443 million school days are lost each year to water-related disease. Livelihoods are dramatically affected when water sources are distant. Women most often bear responsibility for hauling water for use in the home; in sub-Saharan Africa, women lose 40 billion hours of labor hauling water each year—time they can’t spend with their families, tending gardens, or earning income. The real value of this lost time and health is difficult to measure, but in pure economic terms, every dollar invested in water and sanitation is estimated to yield *four* dollars in improved use of time and reduced health expenses.

How widespread is this problem? When it comes to water, the most consistent measure we have is “access to improved water sources,” a number that’s been tracked globally for more than 20 years. In 2000, 1.1 billion people were declared to be without access to improved water. The number fell to 884 million in 2008, and again to 783 million in 2012. While this demonstrates great progress, it doesn’t tell the whole story. The measurement of “improved water sources” doesn’t account for water safety or sustainability—recent estimates of people drinking *unsafe* water range from 1.8 to 1.9 billion globally, with perhaps 3.8 billion having difficulty getting *regular* access to safe water.

The numbers can be staggering, but to people like Kunguru and her fellow tribeswomen I visited all those years ago, it is a problem that is real and personal. For them, water has a fundamental impact on every other area of their wellbeing: health, education, economic development, and gender equality. Without water, individuals, households, and communities simply cannot live up to their God-given potential.

UNDERSTANDING THE TASK

It's clear that something must be done. But as we address this critical problem, there are a couple of hard-won lessons we need to remember:

1. It's not just about the hardware

It's easy to think about water as a simple engineering challenge—one that can be solved with the right kind of well or the right kind of pump. In the 1950s and 60s, everyone thought about it that way. In the 70s and 80s came a realization that without good *sanitation*, a community just couldn't keep their water safe; after that, the two were generally addressed together and referred to as “Watsan.” In more recent years it has become clear that a community's behaviors are *at least* as important as its infrastructure—the simple act of hand washing, for instance,

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can reduce disease transmission by up to 53%. Today, these three aspects of development are usually integrated into “Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene,” or “WASH.”

2. Communities must lead their own development

Those of us from relatively rich countries often see development challenges that seem straightforward on the surface—like lack of safe water—and take it on ourselves to “fix” the problem. We bring our financial resources, knowledge of *how* things should be done, and *how quickly* they should be done. We may have the best of intentions, but it is easy for us to do more harm than good. If development is to be transformational, it needs to be led by the local community, driven by local demand, and use local resources whenever possible. Being agents of transformation within their own communities helps people gain dignity, recognize the image of God in themselves, and take on their

roles as stewards of God's good gifts.

“Using a pump is like carrying a chicken egg. You better be gentle.” Foday Massalay is full of useful advice on this subject—he is the caretaker of the hand pump that stands across the road from the church in the center of Kakata, Liberia. A year ago, the 16 nearby households organized themselves and elected a “water committee”—three women and two men, including Foday, who set the rules for the pump's use, and manage its operation and maintenance. They developed a fee system, in which a household purchases a small, pink ticket each month for the local equivalent of 50¢, and must show the ticket each time they collect water. So far,

it has used the funds to purchase spare parts for the pump, erect a fence to keep animals at bay, and saved enough to cover the cost of any conceivable maintenance expense. The committee chose to keep its accounts transparent by recording its rules, meeting notes, income, and expenses in a school notebook that anyone in the community can ask to see. “Sustainability” has become quite a buzzword in recent years. As outsiders, we can't *produce* sustainable projects. Every community is *already* sustainable, at least to some degree, or it wouldn't exist. It's our role to discover the ways God has empowered a community to sustain itself, and to *cultivate* those things. Almost always, ideas and methods that emerge from this kind of collaboration are better than anything we could have brought from the outside.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL CHURCHES

The Church is God's primary agent of transformation in the world; a *local* church is both an agent and a sign of God's kingdom within its community—a body of living witnesses to God's work in that place—and is central to the transformation of that community. The development of water, sanitation, and hygiene services can be a natural arena for local churches to live out this transformative role, working toward a healthy and vital community, and loving their neighbors well.

WASH has developed beyond infrastructure alone, to include the growth of communities toward improved behaviors—this requires local champions, who are trusted and have a long-term presence. The growing importance of community leadership and local management necessitate thoughtful messaging, demonstration, and good facilitation. These are roles that can naturally fall to local churches, and can be an avenue for cultivating healthy relationships within communities.

“Water helps us to live the gospel here,” Pastor Matthew says with a smile. He sits on the stool across from me, in front of his home in Kadapuram Village,¹ in central India. The small church he pastors is made up of low-caste converts from Hinduism. They have always been outcasts in this community and denied access to even the most basic of services, including the hand-dug well at the center of the village. That all changed three years ago, when, in partnership with Living Water International, the church approached the village elders, offering to install a well on their small church tract for the benefit of the community. The well was drilled, a hand pump put in place, and the church, now with the best water in town, made it available to everyone. Today, the people of Kadapuram walk to their local church every day for water, and the village elders work with Pastor Matthew to manage and maintain the well. “When we hold something that has so much value, and share it readily, doors are opened.”

ROLE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN CHURCH

In the 1920s, the Church in North America had a falling-out with itself. Some Christians advocated for a “social gospel” centered on serving the poor; others were determined to hold on to the “fundamentals” that focused on personal sin and salvation. This division was a defining factor in the North American Church for much of the 20th century, but the rift is being healed as new generations of Christians are recognizing how false that divide is. The 1974 Lausanne Covenant was one of the century’s most influential statements on the Church’s theology of mission; on the topic of Christian social responsibility, the Covenant confessed that the Church had wrongly considered evangelism and social responsibility to be mutually exclusive, and that both were necessary to be fully obedient to Jesus Christ.² The “integral mission” movement emerged from the Latin American church in the 1970s, and has helped us further recognize that the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel are inseparable. “It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done *alongside* each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in *all* areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.”³ Churches across North America are beginning to echo this message.

Parkview Church, in the western suburbs of Chicago, got involved in water four years ago, in partnership with Living Water International. Their initial goal was to collectively give enough money to fund the capital cost of four water wells that Living Water would be installing in northern India, as part of a campaign called Advent Conspiracy. “I didn’t know if it was a good idea, frankly,” says Dave Davis, one of Parkview’s pastors. “The church was facing a financial deficit that year, and I didn’t

know what to expect.” As it happens, the church gave enough to fund 18 wells that Christmas, *and* meet their other financial obligations. “The generosity was shocking—and it didn’t stop. After that, people started helping one another with their car payments and electric bills,” says Dave. “We learned through that experience that our church—and THE Church—isn’t supposed to hold onto its blessings, but to pass them on to others in need.” Today, Parkview continues to give sacrificially, and takes four volunteer teams a year to India, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Parkview’s experience has changed the way they think about global mission—“We got excited about being a part of something so much bigger than ourselves; we realized that together, if we step out in faith, we can make a difference.” Their radical obedience has attracted new people into the church, has opened new opportunities to reach people in their own neighborhood, and given them a reputation for being the hands and feet of Jesus—both near and far.

A TIME LIKE NO OTHER

Today, churches around the world are recognizing their call to reach out with the whole gospel, both in their own neighborhoods and across the globe. Mission agencies that have traditionally focused on evangelism are seeing the need to address people’s physical and social needs. Relief and development agencies that have always focused on social transformation among the poor are recognizing their need to bear more consistent witness to the gospel of Jesus within their work. An incredible amount of time and investment in the past 20 years has helped us understand how to multiply the impact of water, sanitation, and hygiene in communities. The time has never been more ripe for the “whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world,” as the Lausanne Covenant charges us to do, and to start with water.

Just over a century ago London and New York were centers of infectious disease. Diarrhea, typhoid, and dysentery killed as many children as they do today in sub-Saharan Africa. Industrialization boosted income, but child mortality and life expectancy hardly changed—*until* safe water and sanitation broke the cycle of disease. We have safe water to thank for half the mortality reduction in the United States between 1900 and 1930. Can you imagine that kind of transformation happening in today’s Haiti, India, or South Sudan? Can you imagine local churches—with the support of the global Church—being at the center of it, to the glory of God? 

¹ Community name changed for security reasons

² <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>

³ Micah Network Statement on Integral Mission, 2001: http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/mn_integral_mission_declaration_en.pdf