

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 January 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Douglas Stewart
Epiphany 2C (Christmas Bowl)

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11; John 2: 1-11;

The Holy Compassion of God by Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th Century)

Good morning.

Thank you for your warm welcome to Pitt Street.

I am a volunteer speaker from Act for Peace which is the International Aid Agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia. Act for Peace organises the Christmas Bowl Appeal which is still running. Your donations have assisted and will continue to assist Act for Peace in its vital work with its international Partners in many parts of the world.

Today we shall focus on four countries - Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Vanuatu.

May we please set the scene with a short video about the desperate conditions in Ethiopia?

Slide 2

This little boy's name is John. He is 8 years old. He may be dying just because he did not have clean water. When John's family fled the horrific war in South Sudan, they arrived in a refugee camp in Ethiopia with nothing. They thought that here, at last, they would be safe. They were wrong.

John is too weak to move. His mother is afraid he will die. Like many others in the camp, he has succumbed to Hepatitis E.

All it would take to save John is a bit of clean water and some soap. No fancy drugs. No cutting edge medical research. Just soap and water.

Slide 3

South Sudan is the youngest nation in the world and remains unstable.

Recent violence has forced more than 200, 000 refugees to flee over the border to Ethiopia to escape the fighting. However refugee camps are full and unsanitary living conditions mean potentially fatal diseases can easily spread. 200, 000 refugees roughly equates to the population of Hobart. Imagine the people of Hobart all crammed into refugee camps.

Slide 4

This is Akula Camp where John lives after fleeing Sudan. People have to go to the toilet anywhere they can. The smell, the flies, and disease are everywhere.

Children like John could die, but, thanks to your gifts to the Christmas Bowl Appeal, we can stop this right now. The solution is simple: clean water, soap and toilets.

Slide 5

This courageous young woman is called Kama. Kama grew up in a small, peaceful, farming community in South Sudan. She has a beautiful daughter and is pregnant with her second child.

But, a few months ago, soldiers came to Kama's village on a rampage of killing the villagers and burning their houses. Kama and her daughter only just escaped with their lives.

Slide 6

But through the Act Alliance (a Partner of Act for Peace) Kama was given a jerry can to carry water, and soap so that she could prevent contamination from deadly diseases. This is the sort of practical assistance which your support for the Christmas Bowl Appeal has provided. For example: \$30 can provide soap for a month for 25 families like Kama's.

Slide 7

Many of us have grown up with the Christmas Bowl Appeal which has a proven track record. It was started in 1949 by Rev. Frank Byatt, a Methodist minister in Victoria, and it has grown exponentially. Today, 2,000 churches from 19 denominations in Australia come together each year to share this special tradition to help the world's most vulnerable.

Slide 9

This is Mr. Merga, who we met in the earlier video. He is a refugee hygiene promoter. \$75 will help pay the salary of a Refugee Hygiene Promoter for up to one month.

Slide 10

A generous gift of \$285 will provide a toilet for refugees from South Sudan in Ethiopia.

The Pitt Street Congregation has already given over \$15, 000 to the Christmas Bowl Appeal. This is enough for 52 toilets.

Slide 12

This slide shows some of the countries in which Act for Peace is working with its partners.

By our gifts to the Christmas Bowl Appeal, we can be bearers of hope in Zimbabwe. Once considered to be the "Bread Basket" of Southern Africa, Zimbabwe is now one of the poorest countries in the world. Its rural farming communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change and decreasing rainfall. 1 in 3 people in rural Zimbabwe are facing devastating food shortages and extreme hunger.

\$90 will teach conservation farming techniques to a group of farmers in Zimbabwe so that they can grow enough to feed their families.

Slide 13

Act for Peace works with our partner organisation Community World Service in Afghanistan to provide girls in the Nangarhar Province with back packs filled with School Materials. An example of this provision is shown on the left hand side of the screen.

Twenty years ago, the Taliban were in this area of Afghanistan and there were no schools for girls. The position has changed, but not enough. On the right hand side of the screen is a photo of Mrs. Nazar, who is headmistress to more than 3,300 girls attending one of the schools.

Thanks to your generous support, Community World Service has also been able to work with the local council to help parents understand the benefits of girls receiving an education. This has resulted in strong school attendance.

Act For Peace and Community World Service also train female teachers and provide school supplies for girls. With more girls attending school every year, more supplies are needed. Girls are still fighting for equal access to education in Afghanistan.

Nelson Mandela has stated that education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.

Slide 14

Closer to home, remember the devastating Cyclone Pam which hit Vanuatu in March last year? The cyclone tore through Vanuatu and damaged homes and crops and left communities without food and water. It was the worst natural disaster to hit Vanuatu in decades.

As climate patterns intensify in the Pacific, Vanuatu is becoming increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters and extreme weather.

Act for Peace is leading a Disaster Risk Reduction Project which has been rolled out in Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Our partner, the Vanuatu Christian Council, worked together with Churches in Vanuatu to provide aid to villages as they rebuilt after the devastation.

On the left of the screen we can see an example of Act for Peace with the Vanuatu Christian Council distributing tarpaulins to education centres. On the right, we see the distribution of seed and farming tools to revive homestead gardens.

The Disaster Risk Reduction Project involves training and practice of evacuation procedures. It meant that people knew where to go during Cyclone Pam and were able to take shelter in the evacuation shelter which is often the Village Church. People knew to take the important documents with them when they left their homes, which helped later when everyone in the village was being accounted for. The process of recovery and rebuilding is still continuing in Vanuatu some ten months after Cyclone Pam.

Slide 15

Refugees like Kama and John are struggling every day to survive. With your support they, and thousands like them, are given the chance of a safe and prosperous life.

Act for Peace would like to extend a Thank You to everyone from the Pitt Street Congregation. We really appreciate the generous support you have given us over an extended period of time.

Slide 16

As we consider our response to the Christmas Bowl Appeal and appeals for humanitarian aid generally, three words of encouragement come to my mind - one from a hymn, one from a prayer and one from the Bible.

Firstly, the hymn, the first verse of your closing hymn today, is particularly relevant.

*For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead.*

Secondly, the words in the Prayer often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "*It is in giving that we receive.*"

It is a paradox, isn't it? But, so true. It is in giving that we receive.

Thirdly, the words of the Bible contained in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Chapter 25, Verse 40:

"In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me"

Therein lies the challenge for each one of us.

Amen.