



# Integrating Christian Witness

## Extraordinary Witness in Ordinary Ways

*Providing the world  
with evidence of  
goodness and hope*



# Integrating Christian Witness Series

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of goodness and hope*

Tim Dearborn



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## INTRODUCTION

# Living as Eyewitnesses

Everyone is a witness to something. We are all placed on life's witness stand and cross-examined by our circumstances, as well as by those who observe how we live. Being witnesses isn't optional. The question isn't, 'Will we witness?' but rather, 'To what (or to whom) do we witness?'

As a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the humanitarian sphere, World Vision is acutely sensitive to this word 'witness'. It relates to both World Vision's imperative to maintain a distinct and credible Christian identity as followers of Christ and, equally, to World Vision's imperative not to use aid in ways which exploit people's vulnerability to encourage their conversion.

There is no point in asking, 'Should I witness?' Our conviction is that whether or not to 'witness' is not an option. Every person and every organisation 'witnesses' through lives, deeds and words to what they believe and what they value.<sup>1</sup>

*Every person and every organisation  
'witnesses' through lives, deeds and words to  
what they believe and what they value.*

<sup>1</sup> For a full exploration of this, see 'You Will Be My Witnesses': *Unavoidable witness in the work of World Vision*, Tim Dearborn; World Vision International, 2011.

Rather, the questions we all face are, ‘Does my witness have any credibility, and am I witnessing to something worth knowing?’

Because witnessing is a natural part of life as others observe how our words and actions match, it cannot be a programmatic add-on, or even an orchestrated strategy. It is not an optional lifestyle adopted by some but shunned by others.

World Vision staff, regardless of whether or not they identify themselves as Christians in the daily course of their work, witness daily. It is for this reason that for years, World Vision Cambodia has encouraged all staff, regardless of faith, to attend a workshop on ‘holistic Christian witness’. A spectator to a car accident needs to know enough to give an accurate account of what they’ve seen. All World Vision staff need to know enough about World Vision’s Christian identity and commitments to give an accurate account to others about what World Vision’s beliefs and values are. Amongst those of us who are gifted to overtly announce our identity as ‘Christ followers’, we either bring credit and credibility to the love of God and gospel of Christ, or we veil it in disrepute.

Historically, and in the anecdotes of World Vision’s daily work, Christians’ best witness tends to occur at the intersections where words meet deeds, where the church meets the anything-but-church, where life meets death, where certainty meets uncertainty. In the midst of life’s ordinary encounters, we give witness to the kingdom of God at the intersections of the eternal beauty of heaven wherever we encounter the traumas of earth. Our witness is intended to provide evidence of that Great Day when all human bondage will end in heaven’s freedom and when all our sin-sourced wounds will be healed in God’s embrace.

This kind of witness invades the ordinary moments of daily lives with the extraordinary reality of God’s goodness. It can and should pervade all we do because it flows from God’s presence in all we are. People who claim to know Christ are claiming to have been touched by heaven. Is there any credibility in their life and ‘eye-witnessing’ for this claim? Christians witness to the kingdom of God because we long for all we touch to be fore-lit (not foreshadowed) by heaven.



Likewise Christians claim the high and holy privilege of bearing witness to the good news of God's kingdom. Our witness requires that our lives and testimony manifest signs of God's kingdom amidst the kingdoms of this world. Just as with the incarnate person of Jesus Christ, followers of Christ make the claim that our life on earth intersects with the life of heaven. In other words, in our everyday, ordinary lives, we are claiming that the reality of God's good future is drawn into the present. By the power of God's Spirit, God penetrates the powerlessness of human frailty person by person, towards overcoming oppression, towards establishing justice, towards relieving suffering, and towards establishing conditions needed for people to flourish. It is not all at once, but it is sure, and we can see enough to do our part, or not, as we choose. When God's love and faithfulness invade our own life, turning hopelessness to hope, this is such good news that we can't help but talk about it. Some even need to sing or shout it from rooftops: Freedom and joy have come to what was barren hopelessness. So we are all witnesses, and the only question is whether or not we are credible witnesses.

*When God's love and faithfulness invade our own life, turning hopelessness to hope, this is such good news that we can't help but talk about it.*

Therefore, what a distortion it is that in contemporary ears, speaking of this good news in any way is viewed by many as a bad thing to do.

Our world is increasingly conflicted over the legitimacy of any kind of evangelism, which is the common meaning amongst ordinary Christians when they use the word 'witnessing'. Many people view this as divisive and arrogant. Heart-felt desire to see other people experience for themselves God's love in Jesus Christ is rejected as self-righteous and judgemental, even if their previous world view has become unhelpful to them and they are seeking a new way forward.

Globally, with cities and societies rocked by religiously fuelled violence, religion itself is regarded by many as the problem. Especially problematic

is any desire or effort to encourage others to convert to one's faith. In many cultures and states where World Vision works, it is illegal or at least socially forbidden to engage in any conversation or activity that could lead to conversion of religious faith or identity. In some places, people do not have the right or freedom to choose for themselves what they believe or think and how they behave.

Today, nearly any discussion of one's faith with the hope that another might embrace it is defined as 'proselytism'. Historically, this 'sharing' of one's faith was defined as bearing witness to good news, which is what the word evangelism literally means in its Greek origins. But evangelism, once viewed amongst Christians as a beautiful expression of love as expressed in the Golden Rule ('do unto others as you would have them do unto you') – or at least as thoughtful concern for the well-being of another – is now maligned even within some churches and certainly outside the church. It is condemned as arrogant, manipulative and an imposition of one's personal (and preferably private) faith on others.

World Vision rejects proselytism when understood in its historic definition as using relief aid or development assistance to induce or add incentive for conversion. We consider this to be unethical and dishonouring to the people we serve and work alongside and to God. World Vision wholeheartedly endorses the internationally accepted standard that it is irresponsible to use aid to promote a particular religious or political point of view.<sup>2</sup>

As a Christian humanitarian organisation, World Vision and our staff are regularly scrutinised to see if we are, in fact, proselytising. World Vision cannot, and should not, hide our intentions. The purpose of World Vision programmes is to seek justice, empower the poor, and relieve suffering and oppression, because this is the will of God and an expression of God's love. These purposes are good in and of themselves. They are not means to other ends. At the same time, we affirm our hope that people would experience the unconditional love of God and fullness of life as followers of Christ.

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2 For a more detailed discussion of this, see 'You Will Be My Witnesses': *Unavoidable witness in the work of World Vision*, Tim Dearborn; World Vision International, 2011.

World Vision wants to walk in the ways of Christ and work with communities to see people's suffering relieved and oppression removed. Clearly, our purpose is to be a good-news-bearing and good-news-sharing organisation. We are resolute in our commitment to bear witness to the good news of God's love in Christ for all people. World Vision's Mission Statement and other core documents clearly announce our commitments.

*We are resolute in our commitment to bear witness to the good news of God's love in Christ for all people.*

**From the WVI Mission Statement:**

WORLD VISION is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God. We pursue this mission through integrated, holistic commitment to . . . witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word and sign that encourages people to respond to the Gospel.

**From the WVI Statement of Core Values:**

We bear witness to the redemption offered only through faith in Jesus Christ. The staff we engage are equipped by belief and practice to bear this witness. We will maintain our identity as Christian, while being sensitive to the diverse contexts in which we express that identity.

**From the WVI Policy on Partnerships with Churches:**

Believing that spiritual transformation is integral to transformational development and that the Church is God's sustaining instrument in the world, while continuing to engage the total community, World Vision's commitment is to work with churches as indispensable partners. . . . World Vision shares the Church's commitment to disciple followers of Jesus Christ who bear witness to the gospel by life, deed, word and sign that encourages people to respond to the Gospel.

### **From the WVI Policy on Witness to Jesus Christ:**

Witness to Jesus Christ is an integrating principle in all that we do and one of the core ministries of World Vision's Mission Statement. . . . World Vision intends that Christian witness be expressed in holistic ways through its ministries of relief, development, advocacy and public awareness. . . . Our witness is compelled by the God of love who first loved us. Inspired by Christ, we are empowered to love our neighbours. . . . Christian love is free and is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends. Our hope is that people will experience fullness of life as followers of Jesus Christ. . . . Our witness affirms Christ's authority over the whole of creation – persons, communities, systems, structures and nature. World Vision's witness is expressed by life, deed, word and sign. . . .

We believe that God suffers with the poor and oppressed, and the grace and mercy we have received from Jesus Christ compel us to share in the suffering in the world. . . . We affirm the value of all our ministries as witnessing to God's love for the poor and oppressed. . . .

World Vision's support of religious freedom requires that we do not proselytise. Proselytism takes place whenever assistance is offered on condition that people must listen or respond to a message, or as an inducement to leave one and join another part of the Christian church and/or one religion to join another religion. Respecting the dignity of those with whom we work, World Vision does not exploit vulnerability or use the power of development and humanitarian programs to coerce conversion. . . .

In contextually appropriate ways, national office strategies encourage governments, donors and the general public to recognise there is a spiritual dimension to poverty and development.

## Our commitments are clear

World Vision's language and commitments in our Core Documents are clear – and publicly available for all to read:

- 'We bear witness to the good news'
- 'We encourage people to respond to the Gospel.'
- 'We bear witness to the redemption offered only through faith in Jesus Christ. The staff we engage are equipped by belief and practice to bear this witness.'
- 'Spiritual transformation is integral to transformational development.'
- 'Witness to Jesus Christ is an integrating principle in all that we do and one of the core ministries of World Vision's Mission.'
- 'Our hope is that people will experience fullness of life as followers of Jesus Christ.'

Why does World Vision make such clear statements about the inter-relation of spiritual and socio-economic transformation for sustained development? We believe that some of the factors which contribute to sustained development are rooted in spirituality (world view, values, foundational assumptions and beliefs, community power dynamics). Similarly, as an organisation we believe all biblically based Christian spirituality calls forth commitment to socio-economic justice. If religious faith is confined to personal, private spiritual matters, then no culture can experience the long-term transformation of communities and relationships that the kingdom of God clearly anticipates.<sup>3</sup>

The reflections included in this book seek to address pivotal questions World Vision staff encounter as we seek to bear credible witness to the kingdom of God. How do we engage in such witness in appropriate and

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<sup>3</sup> For development of these ideas, see Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1999; revised edition, Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2011), and Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999; revised and expanded edition, 2011).

winsome ways, without proselytism? How can World Vision fulfil commitments in relief, development, advocacy and community awareness without exploiting vulnerabilities of the people we serve? How can we present credible witness to Christ while working in contexts that are hostile towards Christian witness, with funding that restricts verbal expressions of faith, and often with donors who come from widely diverse faith traditions?

Many books address these challenges through discussions of interfaith relations and strategies for ‘sharing the gospel’. The following chapters take a different approach: Each explores an often-overlooked dimension of credible witness that is especially pertinent to World Vision’s work as a humanitarian relief, development and advocacy organisation. World Vision frequently works in restricted contexts, where the public expression of faith other than the dominant culture’s is forbidden. We embrace this challenge, knowing that many believers in Christ likewise live and work in restricted contexts. Furthermore, we are challenged to reach far deeper into our life as an organisation and into the lives of the people with whom we serve – so that our life itself becomes a credible and undeniable testament to God’s love and goodness, even if this is in the midst of horrific circumstances. Hope is needed most in life’s hard places. As bearer’s of hope, therefore, it is to hard places that we must go. To be credible, witness to Christ must become both ordinary and extraordinary – ordinary in its daily practice, but extraordinary in facing challenges and opportunities.

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### **We witness through:**

- our life and work together as a multinational, multicultural partnership of followers of Christ

- simple acts of hospitality welcoming those who are outcast
- ways we seek change and use power
- how we relate to governments, seek justice and take risks
- qualities that characterise World Vision's engagement in humanitarian emergencies
- advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities
- embrace of suffering
- and ultimately, the resolute nature of our hope.

Rather than inhibiting credible witness, the intense scrutiny to which World Vision and its staff are subjected as a highly visible humanitarian organisation opens up stunning opportunities for witness. As God's Spirit and Christ's life empower us, we offer eyewitness accounts of God's goodness. We have the privilege to bring tangible reasons for hope through life, deed, word and sign with spiritual passion and professional competence. We present the world with compelling evidence for the truthfulness of the gospel and the goodness of God's coming kingdom.

# Partnership: Sharing a Common Future

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*We've never seen people from such different backgrounds  
get along together so well. What makes this possible?*

## 1. When the world looks at us it should be confused

Meeting new people and entering new communities, we are always asked, 'Who are you?' World Vision is a partnership of people from hundreds of nationalities, thousands of cultures. We look like the world in which we serve, but we are called by God to live differently in it! We have a different way of living, serving, and relating if we are to be credible witnesses to World Vision's Christian identity and commitments. We spend great effort at being understood by the world. This can lead us towards efforts to look like the world and to be liked by it. World Vision's marketing success depends on people respecting us and regarding us favourably. But what do we do with the obvious fact that one result of our being faithful to the gospel of Jesus is that 'the world' won't understand us – and may not even like us?


The source of this confusion is captured in the first line of World Vision's Mission Statement: 'We are an international partnership of Christians



following our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ Could we be so bold as to say that the extent to which the world isn’t confused about us is the extent to which we’re not living that mission? The extent to which the world sees World Vision as a Western, or even an American, NGO and a company of the rich seeking to ‘do good’ to the poor, is the extent to which we’re not living that mission.

The scandal of World Vision’s identity and the challenge we face as we seek to live that identity can be narrowed down to one phrase, ‘a partnership of Christians’. What does this mean? Is ‘partnership’ fancy Christian-speak for a business? Or, as understood in contemporary usage, is a partnership an association of independent entities bound by common agreements?

*If World Vision staff live out the biblical understanding of partnership, the world will simultaneously be confused and attracted.*

If World Vision staff live out the biblical understanding of partnership, the world **will simultaneously be confined and attracted**. Everyone in our world longs for partnership. Secular NGOs use the term repeatedly. Humans languish in loneliness and war over our differences from others. We too often wall out those who are different, seeking partnership only with those who are like us. But even then, because we often don’t like ourselves, we have difficulty liking those ke us. Thus, World Vision’s high quality of partnership – unity with those who are different than we are – provides an extraordinary witness to the truthfulness of the gospel in very ordinary ways.

**When we speak of partnership, we speak of being co-heirs.** We find that helpful guidance for how to live as a partnership begins by explaining the meaning of the word ‘partnership’. The English word ‘partner’ comes from the old French *parcener* – which literally means ‘co-heir’. This comes from a word essentially invented by the writers of the New Testament, though it is used only four times therein.

## 2. Co-heirs with Christ

Let us briefly look at three instances in which the word ‘partnership’ is used in the New Testament. They speak to our relationship with God, with outsiders and within our family.

**Co-heir redefines our relationship with God.** Romans 8:14–17 speaks of our being adopted as children of the Father. We are no longer orphaned or abandoned. This is great news for a world where most of us feel alone, abandoned, on our own. We are sons and daughters of the same Father. What’s more, the Apostle Paul goes on to speak of our being co-heirs with Jesus Christ. We share in the inheritance of Christ. We will receive his dignity, character, holiness, kindness. We will participate in his intimacy with the Father and his overflowing love for all creation. We are co-heirs with Christ, if we are willing to share in his suffering.

**Co-heir redefines our relationship with ‘outsiders’.** Ephesians 3:4–6 speaks of Jews being co-heirs with Gentiles. We are members of the same body. This is unquestionably one of the most compelling and, for some, repulsive realities of the gospel. There are no more ‘outsiders’. Most communities of the world define themselves partially in terms of who they are not. Who is outside our tribe, clan, group, church? Who is unsaved, unwelcome, unwanted? Many languages of the world refer to those who speak their ‘mother tongue’ as the ‘real’ people. All others are by implication not true members of that people group and may be regarded as second-class human beings. But the Scriptures say it is not to be so amongst the community called ‘Christian’. ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28).

*‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28).*

**Co-heir redefines our relationship with our family.** 1 Peter 3:7 proclaims that wives are co-heirs with their husbands of the grace of life. What a challenging affirmation in our world, in societies and cultures where wives are not treated as equals with their husbands. In many cultures today, women are subordinate, often without even the same rights as the male children they nourished in pregnancy and to whom they painfully gave birth. Women and girls in many contexts have no inheritance rights. Upon the death of a husband, property (and male children) go to the husband's brothers. Not so in Christ. Women are co-heirs of all that is necessary to flourish – all the grace of life.

### 3. How to live now as co-heirs in the future

In our world, only the children of the rich have reason to look forward to an inheritance at the reading of their parents' will. Only the wealthy inherit wealth in this life. It is not to be so with Christians – we are co-heirs. World Vision support offices (often located in relatively wealthy nations or regions) and national offices (often located amongst the poor) are co-heirs. Donors with investment portfolios and community members in slums are co-heirs. Western mega-churches managing myriad assets and village churches surviving in poverty are co-heirs. We are written into each others' wills. We share a common future. We share a common identity. We are children of the same Father.

*We share a common future. We share a common identity. We are children of the same Father.*

When we live as co-heirs – fairly sharing the wealth we steward, our inheritance, our resources – we deserve to use the word 'partnership'. Without that commitment, the word can be propaganda of the powerful to coerce the powerless into compliance with their wishes. We sometimes might wonder if the word 'partnership' is used as a spiritual weapon to stifle discord in the same way an abusive husband uses the 'partnership' of marriage to suppress the legitimate discontent of his wife.

When we live as co-heirs, we recognise that our futures are intertwined. I have no future unless you do – your future is my future. When we live this kind of partnership, the world encounters a compelling witness to the life-transforming truthfulness of the gospel. If that's not our aspiration, then maybe we should change World Vision's Mission Statement and refer to ourselves merely as an *international organisation*.

This isn't simply a naïve ideal. God would have it shape the entire fabric of how his children relate to one another, of what we do and of how we do it.

Another biblical text, 2 Corinthians 8:13–14, provides some stunning practical implications for how to do this. In the midst of a fascinating lesson on stewardship, where a poor church begged for the privilege of giving (out of their own poverty) to the famine-afflicted mother church in Jerusalem, Paul introduces a simple, but profound phrase: 'They gave so that there would be a 'fair balance''. This extraordinary motive and goal of World Vision's work with those who are rich and poor isn't benevolence, philanthropic kindness or even humanitarian zeal. It's a matter of fairness. It's an act of justice.

**Making the balance fair.** The most determinative event of every human's life is one over which no one has any control: when, where and to whom we are born. From the moment of birth, our lives are 'unfairly balanced' – the scales are weighted. It's painfully obvious that we aren't all born on level ground, with equal opportunities. Some are born in contexts of favour – security, affluence, nurture and opportunity. In most contexts, whether we are born male or female makes destiny-determinative differences. Most people on our planet are born into contexts of violence, a desperate struggle to survive, and a life-threatening lack of access to essential resources. Though all babies share in common that first gasp for breath, some children live their entire lives gasping to survive. From birth to death, we experience the utter unfairness and injustices of life.

The call of God's kingdom, according to Paul and all the rest of Scripture, is to participate in the work of God to restore justice and abundance of God's favour – to restore a fair balance. Scripture repeats

that this is not condescending kindness or philanthropic charity. It is the urgent will of God. This is not giving people a hand-out or a hand-up. It is embracing them as our family, as co-heirs.

In Christ, according to Jesus himself, we experience something that ultimately will be more determinative than our first birth – a new birth. A re-creation of our lives. God gives us a new identity: children of God; a new community: the body of Christ; and a new purpose: to participate in the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus proclaims that the most compelling evidence of the truthfulness of the gospel before the eyes of our lonely and divided world is our love for one another (John 13:34). In the quality of our partnership, we witness to the extent to which, in Christ, 'everything has become new' (2 Cor. 5:17) for 'a new creation is everything' (Gal. 6:15).

A church that speaks of international partnerships with other churches, yet isn't awkward about a US\$2 million building project of its own, risks not witnessing to Christians as co-heirs – fair balance. A family that can spend US\$100,000 remodelling their own home to make it more comfortable and convenient, without dealing seriously with their responsibilities of stewardship, may risk giving witness to something other than God's call for a fair balance. Staff members whose co-workers feel dominated, exploited, abused, or uncared for fail to witness to World Vision's commitments as co-heirs. A person whose spouse or children feel neglected or abandoned is missing the opportunity to establish a fair balance. The extent to which World Vision allows power to reside with support offices and donors, so that money leads or rules our work, witnesses to the power of money rather than the power of love.

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What steps can we take individually and corporately to grow in genuine partnership and live as co-heirs? We are not simply invited to take sojourns from our protective towers or four-wheel drive vehicles, our headquarters buildings, or our aeroplanes.

Rather, the future of the children and communities with whom we serve is our future. Our future is their future. We are co-heirs.

*The future of the children and communities with whom we serve is our future. Our future is their future. We are co-heirs.*

No wonder World Vision India decided to relocate staff and their families to live in the area development programmes (ADPs) rather than reside in district or national headquarters. To date, 800 staff plus their families have relocated. Implications for staff children's education, healthcare and spousal employment are huge. But we are co-heirs.

The only way the scales will be fair, that there will be a fair balance, is if some from the side with all the weight move to the side without.

### **We should ask ourselves:**

- Is my life controlled by 'unfair' gifts I received through my birth, or am I living in the free gift of my new birth in Christ?
- Are there people whom I've treated as subordinates, as 'junior partners', as 'second class'? What would it mean to treat them as co-heirs?
- In my stewardship of resources, am I stockpiling more on my side of the scale, or am I leveraging my influence to contribute to a fair balance?

### **Consider the following:**

- *At stake is not just World Vision's work, but the gospel. We are partners, co-heirs with Christ.*
- *At stake is not just World Vision's work, but our witness. We long for the world to ask, 'What is it about you?' 'What makes you so good, loving, just, kind?' Do people say that about you?*

- *At stake is not just World Vision's work, but maybe even our own salvation.* World Vision affirms in our Mission Statement that we are followers of our 'Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. Christ invites us to participate in the 'partnership' of the triune God. In Christ, by God's Spirit, we are welcomed into the divine embrace, co-heirs with Christ.

## CHAPTER 2

# Hospitality: A Way Home in a World of Homesickness

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*Look at the people with whom you share meals!  
Why do you associate with people like that?*

I must confess that I am writing this to allow the Spirit of God to speak truth into my own life, as much as I'm writing for others. I need this dialogue. I need to learn how to be more hospitable. My church and my country must learn the same. I invite you to participate with me in wrestling with these challenging truths.

### 1. Whom do we invite for dinner?

In our segregated, increasingly hostile world, the best test of credible witness to the gospel may be whom we invite into our homes. Show me who comes home with you, and you'll show me what you believe about the nature of God. The world generally isn't interested in reading our theology, our doctrinal statements, or following our debates about Scripture. The world does notice, however, with whom we share meals.



*In our segregated, increasingly hostile world,  
the best test of credible witness to the  
gospel may be whom we invite into our homes.*

In Luke 14, Jesus goes for a Sabbath dinner to the home of a leader of the Pharisees. While there, although he is a guest in this home, Jesus tells three quick, confrontational parables about hospitality. Each points to God's kingdom banquet. Jesus addresses in rapid succession who sits at the place of honour, who is on the guest list, and who is too busy to come. In verses 12 and 13, Jesus says, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.'

The relation to credible Christian witness is obvious. God doesn't welcome us into the kingdom because of our ability to return the favour. God invites us because of God's own overflowing love and generosity that seeks out ways to include rather than exclude. So, by the power of God's loving Spirit and the example of Jesus, we are to do likewise. Those whom society may view as marginalised discover in Christ that God welcomes them. They are actually the centre. Therefore, we have the gift of practising the same kind of hospitality – finding God's centre precisely among those whom society may view as the margins.

In verses 21 and 23, at the end of the parable about those too busy to come, Jesus says, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' and 'compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.' Throughout the history of the church's engagement in God's mission, Christians often wonderfully obeyed the command to 'go'. In so doing, we've followed the path of God's grace, for God is the seeking, pursuing God. God comes to us.

However, Christians are often hesitant to undertake the second command of God's hospitable grace. We're more comfortable finding and

helping people ‘out there’ than with bringing them ‘back here’. We may go to them, but do we invite them to come home with us? Do we bring the world into our homes? Ireneaus, one of the fathers of the early church, offered compelling affirmation that the Son and the Spirit are the two hands with which the Father reaches out to draw the world into the embrace of the Holy Trinity. How our world needs that embrace!

## 2. The hospitable God

God reaches out to us through his Son and Spirit to draw us into communion with God. Scripture lays out four great movements in God’s hospitality towards us. The first occurs in the beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden he has prepared for them. God goes looking for them, plaintively calling, ‘Where are you?’ and graciously providing clothes to lessen their newfound discomfort with their nakedness. The fourth and final movement culminates in the Apocalypse described by John in Revelation, when people from every tribe and tongue are welcomed around the throne of the slain Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

In between, two more movements of God’s hospitable, welcoming grace occur: one in the Mosaic Law, the other in the coming of Jesus, the Christ. In the Law, God continually speaks of hospitality. Leviticus 19:34 commands God’s people to ‘love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’ Deuteronomy 10:17–19 reminds us that the ‘Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’ The command to practise hospitality towards strangers is one of the most often repeated mandates in the entire Hebrew Bible.

*The command to practise hospitality towards strangers is one of the most often repeated mandates in the entire Hebrew Bible.*

The Bible gives reason to boldly say that if we are not extending hospitality to the poor, the homeless, the illegal alien and the stranger, it's questionable whether we are worshipping the biblical God or not. In worship we respond to God's invitation to find our home in God. Worship is all about God's hospitality!

Credible worship or witness of the God revealed in the Bible leads followers of Christ to extend hospitality to others. Otherwise, we hear the dreadful divine rebuke, proclaimed in Isaiah 1:11–17 and Amos 5:21–24, when God says, 'even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. . . . Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow', and 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

**God is at home with us.** At the centre of the Bible, the third and most significant movement in hospitality is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus incarnates both the hospitality of God – and the hoped-for human response to that hospitality. Five passages in the Gospel of John summarise much of this.

First, in John 1:14, God makes his *home with us*. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us.' God *incarnate* (literally, 'in flesh') comes in humble need of our own hospitality – yet Jesus is not welcomed by his own (John 1:11) either as creator God of the universe or as vulnerable human child. Thus, Jesus has no place to 'lay his head' and is dependent on whatever hospitality others extend. God himself became one of the 'least of these'.

Second, in John 14:2–3, Jesus promises he will make a *home for us*. 'I go to prepare a place for you and will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you will be also.'

Third, in the same chapter, verses 18 and 23, Jesus speaks of God making his *home in us*: 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. . . . [My Father and I] will come to him and make our home with him' (*New International Version*). The gospel isn't done with us. There's more.

Fourth, we are invited to make our *home in God*. Jesus says in John 15:4–5, ‘Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. . . . Apart from me you can do nothing.’

Finally, we are called to make our *home in the world*. In John 20:21 Jesus says, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’

This is welcoming news for our orphaned, abandoned, homeless and homesick world. God is at home with us and God makes a home for us. God’s home is in us and God invites us to make our home in God. Embraced in this life of love, God sends us into our homeless world to help others find the way home.

Homesickness is one of our world’s central illnesses. Few people feel they belong or are safe. Urbanisation’s ills are pulling both rural and city communities apart. Cultures are crumbling under the assault of globalisation. Families are torn asunder as economic needs and desires separate parents from children in historically unprecedented proportions. Divorce shatters the sanctuary of marriages. Much violence in the world stems from rage against a sense of lovelessness and homelessness. Such homelessness leads to despair – often expressed in depression or desperation. Humankind is searching for a place to belong, a place that is safe and welcoming. Tragically, many seem willing to destroy others who threaten that ‘right’, responding to injustice with injustice. As poets in all cultures have put it, to kill the monster, we are tempted to become the monster. To find a true and lasting home, we threaten or destroy others’ homes. In every land and every community, war is being waged on the homes we attempt to construct – whether through the shattering of relationships or destruction of dwellings. Either way, millions find themselves with broken dreams, collapsed homes and fractured communities.

### 3. We are ambassadors of the Great Homecoming

Paul calls followers of Christ *ambassadors for Christ* and God’s kingdom (2 Cor. 5:18–20). God’s people are a people sent away from our own

‘rightful’ homes. Ambassadors live in a place that is not their own. An ambassador is sent from her own home into an alien land to represent her homeland. We are sent into the homeless world to help others find the way home to life in its fullness.

As ambassadors, we are commissioned to give compelling witness of God’s love. God cares for every aspect of people’s lives in every dimension of creation. We are faithful to the gospel when we provide credible witness to God’s kingdom in the quality and holiness of our personal and public lives, in the compassion and competence of our deeds, and in the signs of the coming kingdom that God’s Spirit manifests through us and that defy injustice and evil. Credible witnesses manifest such signs as we purify polluted water sources, heal corrupted political systems, overcome obstacles to education and mitigate the devastation of AIDS. Credible witnesses show signs of God’s kingdom in ordinary acts of human kindness and mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation. Followers of Christ go into a homeless world to let the Spirit of Christ build us up, to become both the relationships and the structures of a safe and holy home.

*Credible witnesses show signs of God’s kingdom in ordinary acts of human kindness and mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation.*

As lifelong ambassadors, God gives us a portable sense of home, so we can be at home everywhere. Because God is at home in us, we are even now able to be at home with ourselves and with others. Christ’s kingdom is over all the earth, and our citizenship is in that kingdom. Wherever we are, we are at home. We live as ambassadors of reconciliation – ambassadors of the Great Homecoming! This trans-national, trans-cultural, portable sense of home is a dramatic witness in our societies fractured by tribalism, racism and violent nationalism.

This mission is urgent.

Note Paul’s strong words: *we appeal, we entreat, we urge, be reconciled to God*, come home (2 Cor. 5:20, 6:1). Words inevitably must be used. Paul

appeals, entreats, urges. These are not passive words. These words carry risk, potential embarrassment, vulnerability and even danger.

## 4. Expanding our capacity to be hosts

‘Should we have people over for dinner this week?’ we may ask. Hospitality is the nature of God, the nature of the gospel, the nature of discipleship and the nature of the church.

Hospitality isn’t optional. If I don’t feel comfortable bringing those who are poor into my house, then possibly I should feel uncomfortable with my house. If so, my problem is not with the poor but with my possessions. Michael Green, in *Evangelism in the Early Church*,<sup>4</sup> documents that one force contributing to the rapid growth of the early Christian movement was the quality of their fellowship. The word chosen in the gospels to describe gatherings or fellowship, *koinonia*, was the everyday, ordinary Greek word for ‘club’. Throughout Greco-Roman society many kinds of clubs proliferated. The scandalous distinctive of the Christian club, attractive to some and repulsive to others, was that theirs was the only ‘club’ not segregated by gender, class or ethnicity.

Followers of Christ witness to the world of the gospel’s truthfulness by our love for one another (John 13:34–35). Only in Christ are all the walls of division broken down – race, culture, gender, class (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14–17). Christians’ unity – a unity enriched by cultural, social, gender and racial diversity – was the most convincing proof of the truthfulness of the gospel, according to eyewitnesses (John 17:21–23). Any churches today that are ethnically, socially or economically segregated (some would say ‘cleansed’?) rob the world of that most compelling proof of the truthfulness of the gospel. These verses are not at all about political correctness, but about love and God’s embrace.

*Followers of Christ witness to the world of the gospel’s truthfulness by our love for one another.*



<sup>4</sup> Michael Green. *Evangelism in the Early Church* (UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970).

What gives Christians, and World Vision staff, the capacity to love this way? The closer we are to the heart of God, the closer we come to others, and especially the closer we move to the homeless world. We cannot do this with the inconstant love of humankind or even resolute commitment. It's too risky. We are too vulnerable. We can only be this hospitable when we join together in the love of the hospitable God.

**We love with the love we've received in Christ.** 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 5:5). In the Eucharist, bread and wine are referred to as the host. Jesus is our host. He said that unless we feed off of him, we have no life in ourselves. Before giving ourselves to the needs of others, we must come to our host to be nourished. We must become filled up with Christ, by Christ.

Amongst World Vision staff, I regularly meet people I would call global heroes, although most of them would say they are ordinary Christians. Dorothy is a World Vision staff member in Rwanda. To her horror during Rwanda's genocide, a mob dragged her son out to their house's front garden and hacked him to death with machetes. She could never forget the face of the man who led that attack. Several years ago, a man furtively knocked on her door. It was her son's attacker. The man said, 'Ever since that night, I've not been able to go to sleep without thinking of your face. I've been tormented and knew that you were praying for me. I can't live this way anymore. Take me to the police so that justice can be done!' Dorothy replied, 'Justice will indeed be done. Come inside my home. You took away my son. Now, you will be to me as a son!'

Dorothy's witness is truly extraordinary. In the ordinary act of inviting a young man into her home, she witnesses to God's way of overcoming racism, genocide and hatred. What makes this impossible response possible? Dorothy's response is rooted in the welcoming love of God. Because the Lord had already invited Dorothy home, and made a home with her, she didn't need to put up normal human responses of vengeance or retreat. Her justice was not dependent on waiting for the international community or even local judges to rule on legal technicalities, but rather on transcendent justice. God invites us home, welcomes us

home, makes our lives God's home. This frees us to invite others – even those who repent of having wounded us in indescribably deep ways – into our homes with safety and assurance. This is extraordinary, and 'Apart from me you can do nothing', Jesus warns. But Jesus also says, in John 14:12, 'the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these'.

## 5. Should there be limits to our hospitality?

But wait a minute! Isn't this asking too much? Aren't there limits to hospitality? In our world so filled with homelessness, needs for hospitality are guaranteed always to not only surpass our capacity but threaten our safety. Are there biblical principles for guiding us when we can't do any more? Can Christians support their nations closing borders to new immigrants or migrants? Can Christians ever refuse to bring more people home? Why? When? For what reason?

**Homes have walls – and doors.** Unless boundaries exist for both the host and the one being welcomed, neither can expect a safe haven.

Because hospitality means letting the guest feed off of the life of the host, if the host has no life left, then both starve. A house without boundaries quickly becomes an empty house and, therefore, inhospitable. In Galatians 5:13–15, Paul sheds important insight regarding how to determine boundaries of our hospitality: 'For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.' From this we can discern a few key lessons.

**We are called to freedom.** I do not live in conformity to another person's standards as to what my life should look like. I host others based on God's call to me, God's home-making in me and for me – not others' expectations for me. This is especially important in situations where



church leaders or families place expectations on ways certain individuals should or shouldn't invite the world home.

**We reject self-indulgence.** I do not live to guard my personal possessions, convenience, time, affluence, reputation or others' impression of me. If I think these things 'belong' to me, then I have stolen them from God and the poor. God's word teaches that I am merely a steward of these gifts, not the owner.

**We live in love.** God calls us to love ourselves. None of us are to live with self-loathing or self-destruction. My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, deserving great care. If I am not caring for myself, then as their host, I will have nothing to feed others. If I have a family, I am first their host, and the boundaries of guest and host likewise apply.

We must neither be so busy providing for others that we neglect our family, nor be so focused on pleasing our family's self-indulgences that we fail to extend hospitality to others. Though I am a slave to others, with no rights of my own, I am called to love others as I love myself. Therefore, I neither build the boundaries of my hospitality on what I think I deserve, nor do I destroy myself and my home in the act of hospitality.

*We must neither be so busy providing for others that we neglect our family, nor be so focused on pleasing our family's self-indulgences that we fail to extend hospitality to others.*



Love means I protect others from 'consuming' or taking advantage of me in ways destructive to both of us. Will this act of hospitality build people's dignity, character, reliance on God and responsibility for their life, or will it reinforce self-destructive behaviours and attitudes?

We are called to love others as our neighbours in ways that reflect how we would like to be loved in a similar situation. Jesus already made it clear that 'neighbour' cannot be defined by race, class, religion or gender (Luke 10:29–37). I do not set limits based on prejudice. At times, with



holding hospitality may be the difficult but most loving act. Inappropriate hospitality can encourage dependency, deceit and self-destruction. As any good parent knows, setting limits is an act of love.

## 6. Is God ever inhospitable?

Does God ever lock the door and refuse to welcome anyone? Paul proclaims that God ‘desires everyone to be saved’ and that the ‘grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all’ (1 Tim. 2:4; Tit. 2:11). He describes Jesus as the new Adam, bringing righteousness and life to all (Rom. 5:12–19). Yet throughout Jesus’ teaching and culminating in John’s account of the Apocalypse is the lament that some will reject this grace, refuse to repent and will walk away from finding their life in Christ (Rev. 9:20–21). For them, by their own choice, the door remains closed.

Because I travel a great deal, it’s not surprising that I have travelling dreams. Recently I dreamed that my wife Kerry and I were departing on a plane from Africa. We were on board, seated, with our luggage stowed and our belts fastened. Then just before the crew closed the doors and pulled away from the terminal, I had an overwhelmingly strong sense that we needed to get out. I insisted to Kerry that we get off the plane immediately. With great awkwardness and embarrassment, we grabbed our bags and talked our way past flight attendants and off the plane. Now we found ourselves standing in the terminal, perplexed. What had we just done? What were we to do now? I’d just wasted hundreds of dollars in plane fare, and the next flight home wasn’t for several days. I felt foolish. All we wanted was to get home and now I had delayed us. In confusion we gazed out the terminal window watching our plane gracefully lift off the runway. To our horror, it suddenly banked sharply to the right and crashed into a building, erupting into an inferno of flames.

When I woke from this dream, my heart was pounding. In addition to relief that we had been saved, I felt a deep sense of grief. I acted on the sense I had received to save Kerry and myself. But I did not have enough

faith or courage to call out to others, ‘Leave this plane immediately! It’s going to crash!’

All around us are people to whom the Spirit of God wants to say through us – by our lives, our deeds and our words – ‘Flee your current path. This route won’t take you home. Come to Christ; he is the way to life in all its fullness.’ But like me on the plane, I’m too afraid of looking foolish, too afraid of offending, too afraid of being rejected, too afraid of being violently opposed. Yet Paul says, ‘I plead, beg, beseech people – be reconciled to God’. Come home.

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God’s kingdom

Our entire work as credible witnesses to God’s kingdom is, in one way or another, the work of hospitality. We work to make the world a safe home. There is urgency to our homebuilding. Lives are perishing from lack of shelter. When will children orphaned by AIDS and war, or damaged by abuse and poverty, be free to sing and play in safe homes? When will they be given lasting homes, not ones gutted or burned by injustice and hatred? Is it reasonable for them to hope for eternal homes unassailable by death and sorrow?

We live as ambassadors of the Great Homecoming – the homecoming of God’s kingdom – apart from which the world perishes in life’s ravaging storms. Whereas ambassadors of nation-states, great powers and principalities travel in style, with flags waving and sirens blaring, we go in the humility of heaven. With Christ as our life and example, we bring God’s homecoming invitation to the margins, amongst those who are outcast and rejected. There too we are at home, and there we live with the dignity and authority of ambassadors of the Lord of creation. The Spirit of God is calling and propelling us, ‘Go. You are ambassadors of Christ. The world is languishing until it finds the way home’.

# Change: How Much Transformation Do We Dare Seek?

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*Most people focus on helping themselves and their immediate family and friends. Why are you so determined to see others' lives improve?*

Of all people in the world, the staff of World Vision ought to be amongst the most comfortable with change. We exist as an organisation to catalyse change. For that to occur, to paraphrase John Calvin, 'We must be changed and always changing.' In Galatians 6:15, Paul says, 'a new creation is everything'. The one thing we in World Vision prepare for, seek and expect is *change!*

## **1. How much transformation do we dare seek?**

The gospel proclaims the good news that God loves us so much that God accepts us the way we are ('while we were yet sinners', as Paul puts it). We are loved and accepted not because of our good deeds or pious prayers, but because the God of love offers us new life in Christ.

*We are loved and accepted not because of our good deeds or pious prayers, but because the God of love offers us new life in Christ.*

There's even more news: God loves us too much to leave us the way we are. As wonderful as it is to be accepted, our human spirits long for more. We want change. We want to be better. We want our world to be a better place. Circumstances that paralyse people in needless suffering and inherited injustices need to be overcome. Stagnation in these circumstances often results in depression or exploitation.

In Zambia, World Vision has created community centres called ***Sanduka*** centres. There, women who've been trapped in the sex trade are given opportunity to begin a new life through counselling, healthcare, Bible study, friendship, vocational training and micro-loans. *Sanduka* is the Tonga word for 'deep change'. It's also a Swahili word for a box in which a person carries important possessions. When someone moves from place to place, they put their most important things in a sanduka. Putting the two meanings together creates a wonderful image. Deep change involves retaining what's precious in our lives, and receiving radically new gifts. World Vision could aptly be named *Sanduka*. We are committed to participating in deep changes God seeks for creation. In fact, we are content with nothing less.

The reason sanduka is needed in our world is simple: vast segments of human society, and significant principalities and powers, seek to function autonomously from the authority of God. Unquestionably, division of life into sacred and secular spheres is one of western civilisation's most insidious exports to the world. All sustained socio-economic transformational development is rooted in spirituality (world view, values, foundational beliefs, power); and all Christian spirituality leads to a commitment to socio-economic change. Confining faith to personal, private and spiritual matters means leaving everyday life unchanged and exposed to domination by other powers.

*Confining faith to personal, private and spiritual matters means leaving everyday life unchanged and exposed to domination by other powers.*

If we're not clear about the nature of authority with which we live, we risk being witnesses to forces of secularism, rather than God's kingdom. What do communities see in our work as World Vision?

- The generosity of donors or the abundant love of God?
- Values of western civilisation or values of God's kingdom?
- The power of money or the power of God's Spirit?
- Our confidence in professional expertise and technical skills, or confidence in the grace of God, the fruit of the Spirit, and a future in which 'Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. . . . See, I am making all things new' (Rev. 21:3–5)?

Along with whatever social or economic change World Vision may bring, we risk also importing individualism, secularism and materialism.

World Vision might do great work, but in the end, leave people impoverished in their deeper values despite new-found affluence. Bank accounts may grow, but quality of community life be shattered. Wells may be dug, but trust in God eroded. Diplomas might be earned, but character lost. Social transformation will be short-lived if we don't witness credibly to the fullness of God's good kingdom. For this reason, we can't accept the mandates of some governments, donors and multilateral organisations that we keep all 'spiritual' activities out of relief and development work. If we did, we'd risk witnessing to a kingdom other than Christ's. And, most likely, the work would not be sustainable, because genuine and lasting transformation is at some point always internal, whether from the outside in, or the inside out.

## 2. What makes change possible?

Participating in this transformation does not mean we are its source. World Vision doesn't change the world. We certainly can't change someone else's life or convert anyone to Christ. That's all God's work. Jesus affirms that it is only because 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me' that he brings good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19).

*We certainly can't change someone  
else's life or convert anyone to Christ.  
That's all God's work.*

We receive our commission, our mandate for participation in this 'deep change' work of God in a very familiar passage:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matt. 28:16–20)

We must never seek change in our own name or by our own authority. Unless we're clear about this, we risk being agents of foreign power or economic affluence in the world, rather than instruments of God's kingdom. As God's kingdom ambassadors, we go in the name of Jesus and with the 'authority' of Jesus. Jesus doesn't begin our commission with the command to 'go' but with affirmation of his authority. As the Son of God, Jesus has the credentials to commission us to go because 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matt. 28:18; see also Col. 1:15–20). The most basic creed of the Christian faith is 'Jesus is Lord'. No lord is higher – no king, no principality, no government, no NGO.

This passage concludes with the affirmation from Jesus, ‘remember, I am with you always’. We’re neither alone nor are we the sources of change. Change is not our idea or dependent on our capacity. We are participants in the life-changing acts of God.

The life- and world-changing work of God is comprehensive in scope. This passage makes clear that the gospel is highly political, economic, spiritual and social – every aspect of our lives and societies is to be transformed. Not just people, but nations, principalities and powers are to repent and become new in Christ. Because of the interdependence of the salvation of human life, natural creation, and even spiritual systems and structures (called ‘powers and principalities’ in Scripture), our witness to God’s kingdom is not complete until all aspects of life are transformed. To reduce following Jesus to personal salvation is an incomplete gospel.

*To reduce following Jesus to personal salvation is an incomplete gospel.*

### 3. How much of life does God want to change?

Jesus’ authority extends over all things on earth. To fully follow Jesus, every aspect of life needs conversion! His commission commends three ways we are empowered and charged by God to be agents of ‘earthly’ transformation and change.

**God wills cultural transformation.** ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’. When God calls us to go and make disciples, we often think first of discipling individual people. The word Jesus uses for ‘nations’ could be translated ‘cultures’ or ‘ethnic groups’. In this commission, God recognises the value-shaping impact of culture. Not only individuals are to be ‘discipled’, but cultures as well.

Following Christ occurs within a time, place and culture. While all cultures express many good and beautiful values consistent with God’s will and ways, both Old and New Testaments repeatedly confirm that



all cultures have been corrupted in various ways. Inevitably, dissonance arises between what cultures define as good and valuable, and Christ's will for what is best and right.

One of World Vision's strengths as a multinational, transcultural organisation is that we can expose ways in which various cultures of our world have domesticated the gospel. As an international partnership, we have the privilege of challenging and provoking one another to bring all aspects of our lives and cultures under the discipling Lordship of Christ.

Sitting on a plane as it landed in Chennai, I asked my neighbour, a director of one of India's elite high-tech universities, what he thought might be the 'great idea' India contributes to global civilisation as it becomes one of the world's 'super powers'. His striking reply: 'I would have said our spirituality. However, I don't think that will be the case. We will remain a highly religious nation – but I fear we won't remain a spiritual one. As I've studied India over the past several decades, it seems we've always been about a decade behind the U.S. If that is the case, then ten years from now we will be like America – a highly religious but not very spiritual nation.' He went on to say, 'The Hindu caste system won't be able to withstand the assault of global free-market capitalism. Capitalism is rooted in the pursuit of personal social and economic change. The caste system forbids that, except for the elite. But the drive for change is everywhere. It can't be stopped. The spirituality of the caste system won't survive. Like in America, I fear individualism, secularism and materialism, rather than our spiritual commitments, will shape our daily values.' Our conversation stopped there as our plane landed. These challenging and perplexing thoughts call for the discipling of our cultures so that our values and life goals are formed by the gospel and not by other powers.

**God wills spiritual transformation.** 'Baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit'. Changing our way of life requires not only addressing cultural values to reflect God's will and ways, but also entreating God's transformation of the lives of individuals within that culture. God's gift of new life to individuals is central to transformation of cultures. Scripture portrays baptism as the expression of this. In baptism, we renounce all other authorities that would claim ultimate

control over our lives and proclaim our determination to live according to God's will and ways.

The early church referred to baptism and Holy Communion as the *sacramentum* – 'sacraments'. Anyone who heard this word recognised the cultural/political confrontation implied in its use. *Sacramentum* had another meaning in Roman society: the oath of loyalty a soldier swore to the Divine Caesar when enlisting in the military. By this oath, a soldier swore ultimate loyalty to the emperor, renouncing all other authorities and accepting obedience to Caesar as his highest loyalty. In baptism and communion, we renounce all other authorities and submit ourselves to 'Lord Jesus' as our ultimate loyalty. We are buried with Christ in the waters of baptism, and we rise as new creatures, clothed with the new life of Christ. We are changed (see Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:24; Col. 2:6–12). Our identity, values, worth and reason for living are, henceforth, to be integrated according to the will and ways of God.

**God wills social transformation.** 'Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded' (Matt. 28:20). Following Jesus Christ is not simply professing faith in him or accepting the truthfulness of his teachings. Rather, Jesus required observing and implementing all that he commanded, not to achieve salvation, but to experience its fulfilment. 'Teach them to obey all that I commanded'. Our cultures are to be disciplined so that they reinforce values and world views consistent with God's will and ways. Now, in all our social relations, we are to observe the gospel way of life.

Salvation by God's grace through faith makes obedience possible. Salvation is intended to bring great joy, and deep gratitude. Deep gratitude leads to obeying. Followers of Christ don't obey in order to be saved, because salvation is God's gift of grace. We obey because God's Spirit propels us to live as participants in God's kingdom. Not to obey is to deny the gift of life we've received in Christ. There's nothing heroic, extraordinary, supernatural or saintly about living according to God's will and ways in every dimension of life from this perspective – this is simply what it looks like to walk, or run, towards long-term well-being, what it means to be a human being fully alive!

*Salvation is intended to bring great joy,  
and deep gratitude.*



To illustrate, global resurgence of Islam presents an invitation to Christians: to recover the gospel as a way of life, not just a set of beliefs and Sunday behaviours. It could be said, *The gospel began in Palestine as a way of life, went to Greece and became a philosophy, Rome to become an institution and Europe a civilisation. In America some would say it has become a civil religion, a volunteer activity and a business.* What would others say in your country?

Most of Jesus' commands pertain to everyday life. Following Christ has very practical social implications. For example:

- Love your enemies.
- Turn the other cheek.
- Pour cups of cold water in service to the poor.
- Don't take fellow disciples to court.
- Don't put your trust in treasures.

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

Following are some everyday, ordinary implications that are apparent for us in our life and work.

**We must guard our heart.** The heart of our life as World Vision isn't the power of our budgets or our programmes. It's not our size and stature. The heart of all we do is our life in Christ. Faith in Jesus is our daily way of life, not just a set of beliefs we profess. Devotions aren't merely a spiritual preface to World Vision's work. This worship and devotion are the root and foundation of World Vision's work, reorienting our lives to the reality of the authority under whom we live.

*Faith in Jesus is our daily way of life,  
not just a set of beliefs we profess.*

**We must integrate our lives.** We've all been seduced by the dichotomy between the sacred and secular. World Vision's call to spiritual and social transformation mandates a seamless integration. Otherwise, we bring to people only a partial gospel and partial hope.

**We must affirm our dependency.** As Christians, we unashamedly affirm our dependency. We dare not place trust in spreadsheets, technology, income-generating capacities and professional skills. Community partners need to see that our first impulse in all situations is to call upon the Lord Christ in whom we 'live and move and have our being'.

**We must live with discontent.** We will never be fully satisfied until we see the fullness of God's kingdom and the flourishing of all God's children. We know that the re-integration of every aspect of life established in Christ won't be fully visible until God's kingdom comes in its fullness. So we pray: 'Our Father, . . . Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6:19–10). We are dissatisfied with anything less, and thus are also chronically self-critical. We always seek ways to be more faithful and fruitful, as stewards of God's riches and opportunities, God's calling, and the influence with which God has entrusted us.

## CHAPTER 4

# Power: Rejecting Size as the Measure of Significance

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*What keeps you so humble when you are so big?*

Let's be honest: Our work is all about power. World Vision's call is to work with the poor and oppressed – with those trapped without power and trapped by other powers. How we use power makes all the difference in our work. Are people attracted to World Vision because of the power of our resources – or the resource of power?

The gospel is about power. Jesus gave the 12 disciples and then the group of 70 power to proclaim the kingdom, heal diseases and bind the forces of evil (Luke 9:1–2; 10:9). The New Testament mentions 116 times that *dynamis* (power) is given by the Spirit. All relationships inevitably involve power. To serve Christ is to engage in power dynamics. To be a credible witness to God's kingdom requires receiving power.

With the best of motives, people are drawn into positions of leadership because we think we will have power to exert influence – power to determine the direction, quality, character and outcome of an organisation. Yet once in positions of leadership, we know all too well our own powerlessness. In fact, we're somewhat shocked and amused when others

see us as ‘in charge’. Externally we still feel controlled by someone with more power – more senior leaders, boards, funders, governments, or perhaps less-than-co-operative staff! Internally we often feel controlled by our own inadequacy. So what is the place of power in the life of a leader and in World Vision’s life as an organisation?

## 1. Placing power in perspective

Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden involved power. Its source was the human yearning to be other than, maybe even more than, the beings God created us to be.

‘You will be like gods,’ the serpent hissed. Power is distorted when it is pursued and wielded to make ourselves great, to earn a great reputation for ourselves or to assert our own significance and status. As followers of Christ we must never claim to admire the self-aggrandising way of the Tower of Babel. We may be able to recite in our sleep that the first shall be last and the last first, the greatest is least and the servant of all. We are to denounce pride, ego, selfish ambition or competition, along with arrogance, as sinful distortions of power.

*Power is distorted when it is pursued  
and wielded to make ourselves great.*

**Sources of power.** The Bible is clear that sources of power aren’t merely twofold – divine or human. A third realm exists of principalities, powers and the demonic. Wait, you may say, I’ve read that ‘all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through [Christ] and for [Christ]’ (Col. 1:16). Yes, but not only the first humans, but the Powers themselves revolted against submission to God. Therefore, now we war ‘against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 6:12). Some of us may say, ‘I don’t need or want to be instructed about the reality of demonic powers.’ But most of us could use some reminding of the biblical overview.

Paul asserts in Ephesians 6 that the real war going on isn't against flesh and blood, but against principalities and spiritual powers. Dealing with power, we deal with not just *a* force, but *forces*. The biblical term for principalities and powers is *stoichea* – visible and invisible systems of power and authority, ranging from physical gravity to political governments. These were created by God to provide order and harmony to creation, just as bones are God-ordained means for supporting bodies. We regard such systems and structures as God-made by the same hand of love as we ourselves. Just as the human creation 'fell' from the harmony and order for which we were created, so did these powers. Disorder has disrupted creation ever since. Consequently, our relationships with 'fallen' powers are never spiritually neutral. Unless we recognise spiritual realities behind and within all human power systems, we are vulnerable to exploitation and seduction. Scriptures warn against these vulnerabilities, as well as misuses, manipulations and distortions of power and powers.

**Distortions of power.** One common distortion equates growth of our power with growth of God's kingdom. The day we make World Vision's work synonymous with the coming kingdom, we risk making ourselves into little gods. Distortion of power also occurs when we view opponents and critics as adversaries of God, and view others serving objectives similar to our own as competitors. A third distortion results from aligning ourselves with the powerful in ways that compromise our ability to speak truth to power, in order to secure resources and opportunities for ministry.

**Protection of power.** Jesus prays for our protection from these distortions in his high-priestly prayer of John 17, asking our Heavenly Father that we be protected as we live in the world and that while here, his joy may be 'made complete' in us (v. 11, 13). Our life in this world requires protection – but can also be a place of deep joy. However, we'll never find that joy by cozying up with the powers of the world – in secret or blatantly. As Jesus proclaims, the powers of the world hate us because we do not belong to the world (v. 14).

So what do we do with this? We don't flee! Jesus says, 'I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from

the evil one. They do not belong to the world' (v. 15–16). Jesus goes on to pray about our posture in the world – we are set apart from it and sent into it (v. 17–18). Power is given to Christ's followers not for domination, but for unity. In verse 20 Jesus prays not just for his followers, but for those who will believe because of them – that together we can be one. We are not to be taken out of the world, but the ways of the world are to be taken out of us. It is precisely because we do not belong to the world that we are qualified to be sent as ambassadors.

*Power is given to Christ's followers not  
for domination, but for unity.*

What does this mean for our identity, power and work as World Vision? Have we so identified with the poor with whom we work that we are one with them? Is their suffering our suffering?

## 2. Stewarding power in God's kingdom

On the cross, Christ 'disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him' (Col. 2:15). Paul develops this in exultant depth in Ephesians 1:17–22. Scripture asserts that demonic powers rule over fallen human systems and societies. But these powers are defeated by the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. In Christ all things are reconciled to God. Now, by our lives lived in Christ, we participate in the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Jesus' didn't just die for the salvation of people – but for the whole of creation. Not only are souls redeemed in Christ, but systems and structures, principalities and powers.

We assume conflict and opposition may result when God's power is manifest. But God's way of triumph as revealed in the life of Jesus Christ is the way of sacrificial love.

One quality of Jesus' life that people seem to find either irresistible or repulsive is his absolute refusal to engage in violence or power-grabbing even to save his life. Instead, he took up the cross – and calls us to do the same.



How do we give credible witness with power that has been crucified and redeemed in Christ? Unless we are different from the rest of the world in our use of power, we are likely to be seduced continually by ‘the powers’. The difficult question is: *How do we live as a cross-formed organisation?*

**We die to being powerful.** ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ (Gal. 2:19). I have nothing to gain through use of power because I’ve let go of rights, expectations, everything; I have nothing to defend because I’ve already surrendered. I have no position to guard or possessions to protect because things can’t be stolen from someone who owns nothing.

*‘I have no position to guard or possessions to protect because things can’t be stolen from someone who owns nothing.’*

Remember the mother of James and John, when she asked Jesus if her sons might sit in places of honour in his kingdom? Are we so different from her? Don’t we like to be at the centre of power? Don’t we desire to be first, best, greatest and biggest? We enjoy being strong, significant, at the centre. We hope to be influential and to be noticed by colleagues and others with the power to change things. Who wants to be frail, weak, or on the margins (1 Cor. 1:26–28)? Yet it is the church of the foolish and weak (1 Cor. 2:4) against which the gates of hell cannot prevail (Matt. 16:18). Jesus says to this mother, and maybe to us, ‘You do not know what you are asking. . . . You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Matt. 20:20–28).

The opening call of the kingdom, the first response of those who see it at hand, is to repent (Mark 1:14–15). Repentance releases us from manipulation by principalities and powers. We refuse to engage in power their way. Repentant people abandon control and domination as foolish impossibilities. Walter Wink puts it this way: ‘The direct use of power against a Power will inevitably be to the advantage of The Powers.’<sup>5</sup>

**We engage in the ‘ministry of small things’.** Richard Foster, in his book *Money, Sex and Power*, points to a stunning biblical theme: Power is used best in what he calls the ‘ministry of small things’. ‘Small things are the genuinely big things in the kingdom’ (pp. 218–19). As Lord of the cosmos, Jesus continually focuses his power to benefit the person in front of him.

*Jesus’ use of power is always and utterly relational.*

When the disciples discussed wealth and generosity, Jesus pointed out the widow’s small coin. When they argued about greatness, Jesus placed a small child in front of them. Portraying the power to bring great change, he showed them a small seed. He stressed the significance and importance of an unnoticed woman and people rejected because of leprosy.

Even when Jesus demonstrated his power in large-scale ways, he kept a very personal focus. A storm was stilled for 12 men in a boat. The humble lunch of one small boy fed 5,000. We serve in the power of God most clearly and safely when we serve people others may consider to be small and insignificant, and when we do this in unnoticed, unpublicised ways.

**Here lies our problem:** World Vision isn’t small. We are noticed. Community members’ first impression of World Vision usually focuses on our size, our vehicles, our resources. Our marketing messages depend on assurances of impact and scope. People give because of the influence we wield, the numbers we reach, the results we promise. We celebrate when our staff are interviewed on TV and when magazines and newspapers speak favourably of World Vision. When our CEOs travel, video cameras record and publicise World Vision’s good deeds.

Repeatedly, when Jesus performed miracles, he admonished the healed person to ‘tell no one’. How should World Vision apply these admoni-

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5 For an in depth exploration of this see Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

tions? What are the implications of Jesus' instructions to engage in acts of charity in secret – without even our own hand knowing what good the other hand is doing?

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What does it mean to use power in humble ways, in the ministry of small things? Following are a few proposed 'Success Measures in the Ministry of Small Things' for a large, highly visible, very public organisation.

First, **who owns 'our' resources?** One key indicator in 'the ministry of small things' is whether resources World Vision stewards are perceived as our own or as ours collectively with the poor. When a World Vision office is robbed, we need to be very clear about what is and is not at stake. It is not just World Vision's property that has been stolen. We share stewardship of these resources with the community. When resources are wasted through graft, greed, incompetence or inefficiency, it is not just donors' but community members' resources that have been squandered.

If we work by the resource of God's power and not simply the power of our resources, if we're driven by the power of love and not the love of power – then we will be so connected to communities that they feel the material resources World Vision stewards are theirs as well as ours. We continually remind one another that we are stewards and not owners of all resources with which we are entrusted.

To be crucified with Christ, individually and organisationally, will be verified as reality by the ways in which people with whom we work feel and demonstrate shared ownership of the resources we steward.

Second, **on whom (or what) do people depend?** Another good measure of the nature of World Vision's witness is the source of power on which we most rely. Do we primarily rely on our technical skill, our passports, our budgets and our organisation? Perhaps it is the strange trinity of

power associated with our staff: laptops, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and mobile phones? Do we worship at the altar of the triune ‘ungod’ – size, speed and significance – or at the altar of the Triune God of self-giving love?

What do community members perceive to be the source of our power? To whom do they give thanks for a successful project? To World Vision? To government agencies? To donors? We should be continually chastened by Peter’s admonition to the adoring crowd following the miracle outside the temple, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?’ (Acts 3:12).

Our dependency on the power of God will be measured by the ways we empower the people with whom we work also to rely utterly on God.

Third, **with what are people impressed?** Communities invite World Vision to serve because of the transformation we (hopefully) can encourage. But any organisation that is impressed with itself – its size, significance, influence and impact – risks being manipulated by principalities and powers. May God give us the gift of remaining resolutely aware of our own frailty. ‘But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us’ (2 Cor. 4:7; cf. 12:9, 13:4).

*Any organisation that is impressed  
with itself – its size, significance, influence  
and impact – risks being manipulated  
by principalities and powers.*

What are indicators of this?

- The speed, quality, and depth of our personal and organisational change when we discover inadequacies and inconsistencies. These characteristics demonstrate humble reliance on God. We confess, repent and release our faults to God's transforming Spirit and watch to see God's power perfected in us.
- Our demonstrated reliance on God when we enthusiastically celebrate other organisations' (too often called 'our competitors') effective service for and with the poor. We rejoice when others gain access to resources – grants, donors and market shares – even when we also sought these resources.

World Vision's goal is to see human transformation promoted, justice pursued, suffering and oppression relieved, and witness borne to the kingdom – regardless of through whom this occurs.

The reality of our reliance on the power of God will be measured by the ways we humbly seek God's exposure and transformation of our own inadequacies, publicly celebrate the successes of other organisations, and collaboratively steward resources.

By not succumbing to distortions of power, by stewarding power in the small things of the kingdom, we disarm principalities and powers and credibly witness to God's kingdom. We show that humility begets holiness, that weakness can be our greatest strength, that lowliness brings God's exaltation, and that carrying others' sorrow and suffering leads to healing and hope. This is the way God chooses to unmask the principalities and powers of our world. Their time is short. Jesus asks us to demonstrate to the world what life will look like one day, when all powers are restored to serve Christ and the kingdom.

# Governments: Engaging with People in Power

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*What makes it possible for you to be equally comfortable in the thatched huts of those who are poor as well as the executive offices, parliamentary chambers and luxurious living rooms of the rich?*

## 1. Ministry to the powerful

World Vision is engaged with the poor and oppressed, as well as with the powerful and dominant. By necessity, as we work with those who have been marginalised, we also work with centres of power. Knowing how to deal with power as we build appropriate relationships with both the powerful and the powerless is significant to our witness to the kingdom of God.

Wherever we work, we operate in partnership with governments, one way or another. We always register with, and often are funded by, governments. We comply with government labour and charity laws, and sometimes accept government-appointed staff. Our programmes are often implemented in partnership with government agencies, and they always comply with government and multilateral organisational

standards and agreements. In many places of the world, we either explicitly or implicitly implement domestic or foreign policies of governments. This certainly can convey the appearance of being representatives of these powerful interests.

Profound risks, as well as profound opportunities, result from engaging with government powers. Governments may require suppression of our Christian commitments in order to reduce religiously fuelled tension. In adhering to governments' foreign aid requirements, we may give the impression that we are conforming to and giving witness to Western secularism and democratisation (or what some may view as imperialism), rather than the kingdom of God. At the same time the substantial financial and material resources (power) we receive from governments can be God's provision for the relief of suffering amongst the poor.

Previously, our calling to proclaim the gospel to principalities and powers was discussed. 'So that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Eph. 3:10). Refusal to be seduced by distorted power is our witness to God's triumph and wisdom.

*Refusal to be seduced by distorted power is our witness to God's triumph and wisdom.*

**Here's our question:** What is the wisdom of God and the gospel message that we are conveying to governments and people wielding the power of money and control?

## 2. Working with governments

Throughout the world, we take diverse approaches to political and social structures. Through World Vision's partnership with, submission to, or challenge of established powers, we either utilise or put at risk influence and power as an international humanitarian organisation stewarding money and people.

Our relationship with governments varies depending on the context.

**Agreeing not to engage in public proclamation.** In some countries, World Vision agrees through our registration with the government to neither engage in any kind of social/political activity nor directly support the church in that country. World Vision's conviction has been that in the immediate present, our greatest contribution is to enhance the well-being of children and the poor. In some situations, we submit to political and social structures that do not rule in ways consistent with what we believe to be the will of God, in the expectation that God will open up greater freedom in the future. World Vision's desire to continue to serve in countries rightly provokes caution about generating threats to governments. In the meantime, we let it be clearly known that we are a 'Christian' humanitarian organisation and we let our deeds 'speak' about what we value. Even if there is no verbal proclamation, living according to the will and ways of God is a kind of prophetic witness.

**Directly challenging public policies.** In other countries, World Vision's work to empower children and the poor directly challenges established powers in society. When those without power are empowered, someone who has profited from other's powerlessness will be threatened. As we advocate for implementation of the Convention of the Rights of Children and enhancement of women's rights and participation in society, even while we lay down our own 'rights', we challenge existing patterns and powers.

**Pushing limits.** In all situations we are committed to witnessing to Christ and the kingdom 'to the fullest extent possible' in that context. World Vision lets governments know that for their communities to receive the best of what World Vision can offer, we need to be engaged spiritually and not just socially and economically. However, in humility we recognise that our call to aid those who are poor may require restraint in our call to give verbal witness to Christ and the kingdom. Our challenge is to sustain capacity for long-term engagement in a country without compromising our integrity as followers of Christ.



### 3. Theological foundations for government relations

Several theological convictions about power shape World Vision's work with human powers. Some of these biblical ideas were introduced previously, but they deserve further elaboration as we seek guidance in how to live as witnesses relating with governments.

**Social and spiritual powers have their origin in God.** All things have been created in, through, and for Christ (Col. 1:16). Therefore, we engage systems and structures of power with confidence and compassion – not with fear and antagonism.

**God is committed to save creation itself, not just souls.** Jesus died to reconcile 'all things, whether on earth or in heaven' to the triune God (Col. 1:17–18, 20). Paul speaks of all creation groaning in labour to be delivered from its bondage, awaiting the redemption of the children of God (Rom. 8:18–23). Jesus is to have first place amongst them. Creation's salvation, and redemption of principalities and powers, is interwoven with the salvation of humankind. Followers of Christ must avoid the temptation to convey an overly human-centred view of God's redemptive act in Christ. In a fascinating verse, the psalmist proclaims: 'You save humans and animals alike' (Ps. 36:6).

**We engage with authority and not merely meek compliance.** Christ has already disarmed and triumphed over all rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15). In Ephesians 1:9–10, Paul proclaims: 'He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.'

We don't merely submit meekly to rulers and authorities. Christians frequently turn to Romans 13:1–7 as a foundation for their political theology. But this verse historically was also used by tyrants to force their subjects into submission. 'Be subject to the governing authorities'. When we read the entire passage, Paul outlines the kinds of authorities to whom we are to be subject and under what circumstances, implying by this those authorities that don't deserve our submission. Legitimate

authorities are instituted and appointed by God (v. 1–2). They judge bad conduct and approve good conduct as the servant of God (v. 3–4). They are God’s servants for doing good, and are due honour and respect – to the extent to which they are servants of God (v. 6–7).

Together, these guides for our conduct suggest that systems and structures are legitimate if they enable good in society and restrain evil. To the extent that they are failing to do this, they are illegitimate and do not deserve our respect or submission.

God commended Hebrew midwives for defying Pharaoh’s order to kill all male Hebrew babies. God did not rebuke them for failing to submit in this. Nor did God expect the Hebrews to meekly return to Pharaoh in the face of impending civil disaster and a desert refugee crisis, simply to avoid military conflict or to restore peace and stability in Egypt.

**We affirm that we share some mandates in common with governments.** God has placed his divine image-bearing humans in creation for specific purposes. We hold in common with all people and powers the creation mandate to:

- steward and guard creation
- bring order to creation
- render creation fruitful (Gen. 2–3).

We also bear accountability in common for God’s mandates in fallen creation to restrain evil, protect people from oppression and exploitation, ensure justice and reward good behaviour (Rom. 13).

Therefore, wherever human governments are fulfilling these mandates, we gladly partner together in the purposes of God. Whenever kingdoms of this world thwart God’s purposes in any of these ways, we advocate for change and resist their power, fully expecting to risk our own interests and to bear resulting consequences. We witness to governments with neither foolish bravado nor fearful intimidation, but with courage and integrity inspired by the Holy Spirit.

*We witness to governments with neither foolish bravado nor fearful intimidation, but with courage and integrity inspired by the Holy Spirit.*

#### 4. Living as citizens of the kingdom of God – and the kingdoms of this world

What specific implications should govern how we relate to governments? What exactly are followers of Christ to do? The early church was obviously concerned about government relations. The first followers of Christ comprised a tiny minority, functioning within a totalitarian empire. One misstep and they would be squashed under the foot of Caesar. So how did these early Christians remain faithful to their citizenship in the kingdom while at the same time functioning as residents – and at times citizens – of the empire?

**God's people are called to use power differently.** Suffice to say here that the Christian community is empowered by the Spirit to conform its own social relations to the will and ways of God. Through the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, God has disarmed and redeemed rebellious powers. Christ's lordship pertains to every power of life – saving souls as well as bodies, people as well as creation's principalities and structures. We do not accept sacred/secular dualism or the separation of personal piety from public life (Col. 1:15–20; Eph. 1:10, 2:10, 3:10, 4:10). Christ will put all powers under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). God will make everything subject to Christ (1 Cor. 15:28). We live in anticipation of the universal unveiling of the victory already accomplished in Christ.



**God's people refuse to domesticate God's work in the world.** We must continually confront temptation to domesticate the kingdom of God, soften its scandal, and dull its radical edge. This quickly occurs when we make God's work something we can bring, establish and create – rather than the presence in our lives and world of the powerful Lord of the cosmos.

We are often tempted to make God's kingdom something tame and small-scale – perhaps the restoration of human niceness or the temporary enhancement of the quality of our life. This would make the kingdom of God easier to accomplish – a strategic result of appropriate budgets, moral education and good development programmes. Yet this so-called kingdom risks bearing the sour fruit of people living in conformity with the world, rather than participating in God's transformation of the world.

When we make our home with the powerful, we are in grave danger. We risk becoming agents of the reigning powers' control, rather than catalysts of God's kingdom transformation. We face the constant risk of so focusing on what we can do that is acceptable to others that we never challenge the current way of living. Our most vital role as witnesses to God's kingdom isn't in designing programmes and strategies to further the kingdom's coming, but to repent.

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We are called to be the first to repent. Through our deeds, lives and words, we announce to others the call of God's kingdom. Living as citizens of the kingdom of God ought to be of such visible value that ordinary treasures of the kingdoms of this world seem dull and commonplace.

- God's kingdom is the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45–46).
- Seeking God's kingdom is to exchange anxieties for the world's riches in order to receive peace and righteousness given richly by God (Matt. 6:33).
- Our life in God's kingdom is of such value that we willingly sacrifice self-indulgence (Mark 9:47).
- As ambassadors of this kingdom, God expects us to not look back (Luke 9:62).

**God's people have a higher loyalty.** Previously, it was noted that when soldiers enlisted in the Roman legion, they swore loyalty to Caesar. This was called a sacred vow. In the vow, the soldier pledged that there was no higher authority nor any greater loyalty in his life than to the divine emperor. The word for this sacred vow was *sacrament*. How striking, scandalous and even subversive that the early church chose this word to describe its two central ceremonies – baptism and communion!

When Christians participate in these sacraments, these sacred vows, the believer proclaims that there is now an authority, a loyalty in her or his life greater than the emperor, greater than the state. Her ultimate loyalty is now to King Jesus, for she is a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Yes, early Christians continued to pay taxes. Yes, they obeyed those laws that served God's purposes, and many willingly paid with their lives the price for defying laws contrary to God's kingdom. Whenever there was a conflict of interest between the kingdom and the empire, the early church both taught and demonstrated that loyalty to God's kingdom must prevail.

What adequate measure could help us determine whether we are living with our highest loyalty to Christ and the kingdom in World Vision's government relations? The early church refused to baptise enlisted soldiers because they had already taken a sacrament to Caesar. Therefore, the soldier had to leave the Roman Legion before taking the sacrament to Jesus.

Do we have a clear strategy for our witness to the kingdom when we choose to follow government practices that may be less than fully consistent with the will and the way of God? For example, how should we respond to prohibitions against engagement in spiritual nurture or church relations, or to discrimination against girls or ethnic minorities having access to education?

**God's people exercise a broader responsibility.** When a Roman town clerk wanted to discuss affairs of the community, he called all citizens to the arena or town square for a public meeting. Citizens would gather to

discuss and act on concerns of the town. The word for this gathering of town citizens was *ekklesia*, or ‘church’. Once again, how striking, scandalous and even subversive that Jesus himself chose that term to describe the gathering of his followers! No one who heard him say, ‘I will build my church and even the gates of hell cannot prevail against it’ (Matt. 16:18) would have missed the meaning.

Jesus was calling together citizens of the kingdom of God into his own *ekklesia*. Their responsibility wasn’t to the empire’s affairs, but to those of the kingdom of God. The authority under which they gathered wasn’t the authority of the town clerk, but by the authority of the living God.

What is a measure of our living with this kingdom responsibility, which is certainly broader and higher than that of governments?

- Are we caring for people to whom the government isn’t interested in extending care? For example, what care do we extend to illegal immigrants, street children, or people displaced by government slum clearances?
- Are we willing to speak truth to power and challenge government practices and policies? What price are we willing to pay?

**God’s people enjoy a costly freedom.** Another term to help us understand our dual citizenship comes from the startling term Jesus chose to describe our role as witnesses. In our modern legal usages, we know what a witness is – it’s someone who testifies as to what has been seen and what is known. The prosecutor may attempt to undermine the credibility of a witness, to call into question her or his accuracy and integrity. Jesus’ choice of words, which we translate as witness, is the word *marturia* – from which we get ‘martyr’. A martyr is someone who swears on her life to the integrity and loyalty to truth of her word. A martyr stakes his life on the testimony he gives.

*“The gospel makes this much troublingly clear: kingdom life puts us in conflict with the kingdoms of the world.”*

The gospel makes this much troublingly clear: kingdom life puts us in conflict with the kingdoms of the world. When we help those living at the margins of society to receive the power of God for change, people at the centre may be displeased, threatened, even enraged. Certainly, people and principalities who've profited off of poverty will not receive such changes joyfully.

If we have as our goal being liked, appreciated, respected and admired, we risk being subverted by the kingdoms of the world. On every side, Jesus proclaims that citizens of the kingdom are those who:

- are willing to be disrespected even by our family (Mark 10:29; Matt. 12:29; Luke 18:29)
- are willing to be vulnerable (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58)
- are willing to be despised (Mark 13:13; Matt. 10:22)
- are willing to be actively opposed (Luke 6:22; Matt. 5:10–11).

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What steps can we take individually and corporately to live out this complex dual citizenship?

**First, we must ask ourselves whose respect and endorsement do we most desire?** Human governments ultimately have no power over us. People who aren't controlled by fear and intimidation are free. People with something to lose are trapped and enslaved.

We gladly work in agreements with governments, but if the point comes when we can't be faithful to our king and his kingdom, then we must be willing to pay the price demanded by governments. This may mean leaving a region or even the country itself. If we're not willing to pay the price of this form of organisational death, we are enslaved rather than free.

**Second, we will know we are free from a government or donor's control only if we're willing to walk away.** Are we willing to leave a project, a funding opportunity, or even a country because we cannot be faithful to our calling and conform to the dictates of the government or donor? Discerning when this is appropriate is a complex process, because it means abandoning people in contexts of poverty as well as denying communities our potential witness to the kingdom of God.

**Third, we must ask ourselves what suffering we are willing to bear individually, as well as organisationally.** Walking in the way of Christ's kingdom is to bear the cross (Matt. 10:38; Luke 14:27; Mark 8:38). In his book *The Kingdom of God*, John Bright says:

We know that the Church has been great when she has cast herself straight into the teeth of history at her Master's bidding. When she has grown fat and sought to avoid the Cross, she could neither be great nor produce greatness. . . . It is not a matter of conquests and gains, nor yet of gadgets and creature comforts; it is Almighty God laying down of himself to bring forth a new creation in his image. The Kingdom of God is, therefore, victorious by the Cross and is entered only by the Cross. And it is mediated to the world only by a Church that lays down of itself – and takes up that Cross. . . . Whoever, therefore, offers us the victory of Christ at a minimum of inconvenience to ourselves has suggested the worship of a false god!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1953), 268–9.



# Justice: Righting Relationships with the Poor and Oppressed

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*Why do you pursue justice as an act of love  
rather than an expression of retribution?*

## 1. Pursuit of justice

One of the most compelling witnesses World Vision brings to the world is our pursuit of justice.

Justice is about right relationships. It is not merely a legal word describing rights and duties, judgement and punishment. In the biblical context, justice is a relational term: *people living in right relationship with God, one another and the natural creation*. Justice is a defining dimension of life-giving community. Laws and rights provide criteria to measure the quality of human character, conduct and community, but do not in themselves constitute justice.

Biblical justice is about people living the way God intends for human-kind to live. This means guarding the dignity and God-given rights of

all people, most especially standing up to protect those who are abused, excluded and exploited. Biblical justice requires loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

*Biblical justice is about people living the way  
God intends for humankind to live.*

**Justice is about right life.** The Hebrew and Arabic words for justice and righteousness share common roots, describing the quality of character and conduct necessary for people to flourish in relation with God and one another. Justice literally means ‘to make right’; and righteous is ‘to be right and in right relationship’.

The poor of this world don’t simply need charity – they need justice. They need a righting of relationships. Merely giving alms won’t make life right or resolve structural, social, political, cultural, macroeconomic and even spiritual contributors to their poverty. The poor need justice, expressed in the restoration of dignity, protection from exploitation and access to opportunity for thriving relationships.

**Justice is rooted in the character and nature of God.** Biblical faith affirms that God is love and God is just. The God of the Bible loves (Isa. 61:8; Ps. 37:28) and does justice (Ps. 103:6; 140:12), especially securing justice for the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. As God does justly and loves, so are we to do justice and live in love (Mic. 6:8; Amos 5:24; Deut. 16:20). The Bible reveals God as the One who pursues the marginalised to bring them home; who delivers the captives to make them free. The Exodus account vividly discloses this. This explains God’s constant call to Israel throughout the Old Testament to remember, you were once slaves in Egypt. Therefore, you must care for widows, orphans and strangers.

**Doing justice is not optional.** Justice is a basic expression of faithfulness. Just as God is love, and so loved the world that God gave Jesus Christ so that none should perish but all have eternal life (John 3:16), so the gospel calls us to live in love and give ourselves so that all have

what they need to flourish (1 John 3:16–17). People may refuse our love, but we dare not withhold our loving-kindness. If we don't love, then the love of God isn't in us! God's prophets repeatedly rebuked Israel for their injustices to the poor. The prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 16:49) condemns Israel's hardness of heart towards the poor. Other prophets proclaim that this was a pivotal reason God allowed Israel to be sent into captivity. Yet amongst all societies, we see extravagant wealth alongside children who live in abject poverty, who are sexually exploited and confined to bonded labour, who live without access to education or hope.

*If we don't love, then the love of God isn't in us!*

**We need to understand the progression in the biblical understanding of justice.** The Bible makes it evident that God accommodates human frailty and culture, working within people's understanding to lead them to ever greater conformity to God's will and ways. Initially in Scripture, we see what might be called the normal human approach to 'justice': *disproportionate retaliation* and revenge in response to harm. We see this vividly in the story of Samson in Judges 14–15, especially 15:3–7. Scripture indicates that God sought to replace this with a more constrained response, *proportionate retribution*: 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (see Exod. 21:22–25; Lev. 24:19–20; Deut. 19:21). However, by that rule, we all will eventually become blind, toothless and without limbs. Jesus' coming incarnates a third, radically different approach.

## 2. The call to do justice

Justice isn't simply something we desire, wait for, or seek. Scripture calls us to do justice. Even before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, God's call to do justice is uttered with particular clarity and simplicity through the Prophet Micah: 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?' (Mic. 6:8). This passage makes three obvious, yet profoundly challenging points.

**We are commanded not just to want justice, but to *do* it.** If justice makes life right, then we are called to make life right for others. Our work is to bring life-restoring justice to children orphaned by AIDS, to Palestinians and Israelis oppressed by many decades of internationally and religiously sanctioned violence, to the world's poor locked out of access to means of production for creating a sustainable livelihood, to girls who are often the most marginalised and exploited in societies, and to ethnic minorities oppressed by racism and prejudice.

**The way to do justice is by loving mercy.** In both Hebrew and Arabic, the root for mercy can also mean 'womb'. A mother's womb is a safe place where life can be nourished and can flourish until the time comes to go out into the world. Mercy creates human societies where life, and especially the life of the most vulnerable, can be protected and nourished. That is how World Vision conceives of justice – not first of all as punishing wrongdoers, but as making life safe for the smallest, for the vulnerable so that every person can flourish, experiencing life in all its fullness.

**The way of mercy is the way of humility.** When we focus on the God who mandates mercy, we humans stand on the same ground. This perspective guarantees a humble walk. Humility shares the same linguistic root as soil. We walk humbly rather than arrogantly, gently rather than with anger, united in compassion rather than divided in fear and enmity. When we focus on the future of our children – regardless of one's religious faith – we share a common longing for them to flourish and have a future filled with goodness. We walk on the same soil.

*When we focus on the future of our children – regardless of one's religious faith – we share a common longing for them to flourish and have a future filled with goodness.*

### 3. The radical way of justice in Christ

Our understanding of biblical justice is incomplete without considering, more specifically, the incarnation of this radical third approach to justice established in Jesus. In Christ, God reveals that justice is unrestrained love rather than disproportionate retaliation or proportionate retribution. Jesus said:

You have heard it said, ‘An eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, hand over your cloak as well. . . . You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. . . . If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? (Matt. 5:38–46).

We immediately admit that this approach to justice – Jesus’ requirement for justice – is seldom practised, even by Christians. Jesus’ commands appear naïve, weak and foolish. Yet the gospel proclaims Jesus’ approach to justice is the ultimate form of power and strength.

I was in Aceh, Indonesia, at the time of the 2006 massacre of five Amish girls in a Pennsylvania school. Indonesian media was captivated – first by a further exposure of decadence and violence in America, but later spellbound by the response of the Amish. Charles Roberts brutally killed five girls. Yet half the mourners attending his funeral were related to the girls he killed. With her hands and feet bound, the oldest girl murdered, though still a child herself, asked to be shot first and to let the other children be spared. Indonesians were riveted to the story of an Amish elder. As he washed the body of his granddaughter, preparing her for burial, he said to his community: ‘The most important thing is that we must be careful not to have hatred in our hearts. Hatred is not our way’. I asked a Muslim leader in Aceh what he thought of this account. He said, ‘I’m speechless. I can’t understand it.’ The Amish live well this aspect of the

gospel. They obey Jesus' command. What would our world look like today if Christians around the world responded to injustice, violence and 'enemies' like the Amish Americans of that Pennsylvania community?

**Justice is served and lives are made right only by radical love.** Jesus' way of love requires that we love even our enemies. Jesus defeats evil by absorbing it in unrestrained love, and he calls us to follow him. The only way to right wrongs is to make everything right. We can't do it on our own, but in Christ by the Holy Spirit we receive the power together to live this life-giving justice of God.

*Jesus defeats evil by absorbing it in unrestrained love, and he calls us to follow him.*

Executing a murderer, or punishing an offender, may seem at first to balance the scale, but it leaves someone somewhere still suffering, and perhaps waiting for revenge – that old human norm.

Waging war against attackers or those who threaten us may bind up our dignity and may even deflect some attacks, but this rarely solves issues that provoked the conflict in the first place. The purpose of this book is not to debate the merits of either just war or pacifism. Rather, it is the simple observation that people converted by force or by inducements are conquered, rather than transformed. People restrained by violence or by threat are captives, but not truly transformed. Christians are called to protect and intervene on behalf of the weakest. As we do this, we are participating in the work of God. No wonder Jesus said peacemakers will be recognised as the 'children of God' (Matt. 5).

**The way of unrestrained love makes sense only in light of the cross.**

To be a Christian is to be convinced that in Jesus, God has borne the judgement for all injustice, sin and causes of suffering. We realise this is viewed as ridiculous, scandalous or even as blasphemous by many in the world. Nevertheless, Christians believe that Jesus willingly took upon himself the full weight of human and demonic evil, all disobedience to God and all faithlessness. God's sovereignty, justice and love expressed

itself in that ultimate act of unrestrained love and in God's triumph in Jesus' resurrection. Christians believe that now, as we are crucified through the Holy Spirit with Christ, we share in both his suffering and in his new life that reconciles all things to God, making life right. The Spirit empowers us to participate in this injustice-bearing character of God by not defending our own rights. Instead we defend the rights of others to flourish, for they too are people created in the image of God.

**Pursuing justice for those who are treated unjustly is the decisive mark of following the will and ways of God.** Scripture does not measure faithfulness by professions of doctrine or theology, by the zeal of our worship, or by the size of our religious buildings. Our faithfulness is most credibly expressed by how we care for those on the margins. The people of God are to be characterised by their pursuit of God's justice for the exploited, marginalised and abused. In so doing, we bear witness to the righteousness of God's coming kingdom in which all will experience the character and community-life for which we were created.

*Our faithfulness is most credibly expressed by how we care for those on the margins.*

Jesus the Messiah says that on the day of judgement, God's measuring scale will not be our profession of faith, nor our religious piety (sacrifices). Rather in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31–46), Jesus says that on the day of judgement, the righteous and unrighteous will be separated according to their care for the hungry, homeless, poor and oppressed. God so identifies with those who have been overlooked (or exploited) by the powerful that when we serve those who are oppressed, we are serving God.

**Acts of concern and justice for those who are oppressed are not simply charity – but acts of worship.** Because Christ is present with those who are oppressed, marginalised and suffering, our work with them is not charity but worship. Together we encounter God. Paul describes this in 2 Corinthians 8:1–15 when he says the Macedonians first gave themselves to God – and then out of their poverty, gave their

resources to those who were in need. Paul continues by proclaiming that the purpose of giving to the poor is not simple charity, but so that each would have ‘fair balance’, neither too much nor too little – equity, justice.

Paul describes generosity as a test of ‘the genuineness of your love’, a witness to the very nature of God: ‘For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich’ (v. 9). Jesus’ brother James defines true religion, not as ardent worship or noble sacrifice but as ‘caring for widows and orphans in their distress and keeping ourselves unstained by the world’ (Jas. 1:26–27).

We hear in these words echoes of Jesus’ first sermon recorded in the Gospel of Luke (4:18–19): ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ We also hear some of Jesus’ last words, as recorded in the Gospel of John (20:21–22): ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit’.

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God’s kingdom

What steps can we take to walk in the way of God’s justice – which is to make life right now, on earth, as it is in heaven? Now is the time in history for us to offer ourselves as living witnesses of life in Christ by fulfilling God’s call to seek justice for those who are poor, oppressed and marginalised. May we not be known as people of self-indulgence, legalism, aggression or defensiveness. Instead, may the world know us as people who bring freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, release to the oppressed, and the Jubilee of God’s cancelling all our debts.



# Risks: Following Christ in a Dangerous World

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*Most people seek to flee unstable, threatening and dangerous places.  
You seek to go there. What gives you this boldness and courage?*

## 1. To seek change is to accept risk

Risk is unavoidable. We can't live our lives or work effectively without it. World Vision is well-respected for the quality of our commitment to staff security and to risk management. This is good.

God doesn't ever call us to be stupid. We live in a dangerous world, so we'd better be wise. We can't be faithful to our calling without expecting threats against ourselves – and finding that our mission is threatening to others. Our marketing staff work faithfully and diligently to make World Vision attractive to as many people as possible. But we must also be honest that our work should not make everyone comfortable. World Vision intentionally challenges people and institutions to measure themselves by God's will and ways. We must face the fact that if we are faithful, we will be a threat to some and offensive to some others.

For Christians, one natural difficulty with being at risk has been the temptation to hide for protection behind certain biblical texts, while avoiding other portions of Scripture.

**Ambassadors for Christ.** For example, we like the sound of being ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). Motorcades with flags flying, police-escort sirens blaring, crowds waving – these nicely imply dignity and status, respect and recognition. Such acknowledgement seems appropriate for an organisation of World Vision’s size and influence in the world. Unquestionably, part of World Vision’s witness is to enhance the credibility of the gospel and its respectability in countries throughout our world. So this call to represent Christ with stature and high regard fits us.

Wait a minute! That’s not lining up with God’s words about power explored earlier in this book! When I worked as chief of staff for WVUS, I once spoke at a conference in Florida and was surprised to be met at the airport by a stretch limousine. I get the sense that the Apostle Paul appreciated churches treating teachers with respect and generosity. But I wondered what he’d say about the stretch limo. I’d never been in one before. I enjoyed the ride, but it did seem like strange treatment for an organisation committed to the poor. I arrived at the conference just before I was being introduced. To my horror, he referred to me as *president* of WVUS. I quickly, though hopefully graciously, clarified my role . . . but I’ve continued to wonder about that limo. What luxuries may be appropriate or even indispensable to our work, and how do our luxuries affect our witness, no matter what our title may be?

**All things to all people.** Paul’s call to ‘become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some’ (1 Cor. 9:22) speaks to the flexibility we should bring to life in this world, and to our desire to fit in. Don’t we seek to be contextually appropriate and community-based? We don’t want to arrogantly or ignorantly offend or alienate. We want our work to be locally owned. Isn’t this what incarnational ministry intends – to dwell and work alongside people?

However, there’s a downside here too. How far will we go to accommodate others? Will we compromise ourselves – hiring whomever we must

and accepting whatever restrictions that funders mandate in order to be able to work in a community? If we go too far, will we actually win anyone – and if so, to what?

**Submit to authorities.** We've already looked at the command to obey governments and submit to authorities (Rom. 13:1) and how it leads World Vision to comply with governments' registration laws. This creates access to communities, provides stability and credibility, and enables us to serve the poor. Our work is obviously enhanced by the rule of law, and when chaos rules, often one-third of our staff are security guards. In Somalia, our vehicles require two armed guards – one to prevent the vehicle from becoming a tool in civil conflict and another to protect our staff. World Vision's agreements with governments often place us at tables of power where we can exert a positive influence. Without government support, we'd be severely limited in where we could go and what resources could be utilised.

But will we be so cozy with governments and dependent on their endorsement that we'll compromise our mission in order to remain respected and resourced?

## 2. Jesus calls us to risk everything because we have nothing to lose

**Speak truth to power.** Jesus' approach to witness wasn't accommodating. 'You snakes, you brood of vipers!' he called leaders of his day. 'How can you escape being sentenced to hell?' (Matt. 23:33) Not very winsome words of witness. I'm not sure he raised, in a positive manner, the question in the Pharisees' minds to which Jesus was the appealing answer.

World Vision is more than a *social service* organisation. We are committed to more than *social action*. Followers of Christ are unavoidably committed to *social prophecy* – speaking truth to power and calling those in power to account for how they treat the poor.

Jesus' call regarding with whom we are to associate makes us unwelcome in most limousines. Sinners, prostitutes and lackeys of oppressive regimes seldom ride in cars of power. Yet Jesus says they'll enter the kingdom before many religious leaders (Matt. 21:31). Those in prison, naked, hungry and homeless aren't escorted as dignitaries in motorcades. Yet Jesus says we'll find him amongst these people (Matt. 25).

**Witness with everything we are.** As we've already explored, in Jesus' last words to his disciples in Acts 1:4–8, he says, 'You will be my witnesses'. We might wish he'd used the word 'ambassadors' there. Rather, he chose the word 'martyrs' for witnesses. A martyr isn't necessarily someone who dies for their faith – but they are someone who testifies with everything they are for their faith. Celtic Christians would speak of red and white martyrdom. Red was physical death; white involved loneliness, misunderstanding and personal sacrifice. Both are ways of witnessing. We should expect the world to cross-examine us, to see whether there is consistency in our life, words and deeds. If there is, our testimony stands. If there isn't, our witness is discredited.

Jesus never encourages masochism. Jesus doesn't ask us to risk everything because we're supposed to seek or enjoy suffering for suffering's sake. Jesus breaks into our universe bringing the perspective of eternity, revealing our small obsessions and petty gluttonies for what they are. He tells us we were made for so much more, and asks us to invest in significant soul- and heart-enlarging endeavours that will bring rich rewards that no one can steal and that will never tarnish. Jesus' message is that we are free to live boldly, because ultimately we have nothing to lose. We can live radiantly and joyfully in the face of risk, because we don't have to take ourselves so seriously. Our best interests are already secure. Having been created for eternity, we still revile death as evidence of a fallen universe; but having died with Christ in the waters of baptism, we can say with Paul, 'For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain' (Phil. 1:21).

*We can live radiantly and joyfully in the face of risk, because we don't have to take ourselves so seriously.*

On a trip to Calcutta, my wife, Kerry, and I met with the Mother Superior of a Missionaries of Charity centre in the midst of a slum. Entering their compound felt like walking through the gateway of paradise surrounded by hell. We asked her if the Sisters' lives were ever threatened. 'Of course,' she replied. 'Sometimes by death through accidental violence, other times through disease. But that doesn't matter. We've taken Holy Communion this morning. We're prepared to die.'

**Witness by Christ's life within us.** We can only be a witness for Christ when we live like Christ – and we can only live like Christ when Christ's life is inside us. We speak of being 'Christian' as one of World Vision's three 'integrating principles'. The intention of this affirmation is good. But we must continually remind ourselves of the obvious – Jesus isn't a principle, he's our life! We can't reduce the gospel to values, ethics or even trying to live like Christ. The gospel announces the Spirit-given reality of Christ's life flooding and filling us today – giving us a new capacity to live his way.

What a challenge to our natural desires for control and order – and to be our own little god. In many places, communities welcome World Vision's offer to bring their children values education and morals school. This is far better than education in immorality. But even terrific programmes cannot stand in for the sum total of the gospel or credible Christian witness.

If we stop at values and morals, we may witness to the importance of civic virtues like representative participation, or perhaps to a donor's charity, rather than to Christ's grace. We may witness to World Vision's competency rather than the Spirit's sufficiency. We may witness to the values of Western culture rather than God's kingdom. We may reinforce people's dependency on political power rather than prayer – on money rather than God's Spirit, on external aid rather than the life of Christ.

### 3. Christian witness and risk management

Without the life of Christ at work in us, we may give in to temptations to avoid conflict, flee threats, and play it safe. In a dangerous world, if

we are working with the poor and the vulnerable, we are always in the centre of danger – because that’s where the poor live. The poor can’t afford security systems and militaries.

So what do worthy risks, even worthy conflicts, look like? How do we know when to ‘count the cost’ and when to negotiate?

What does it mean for us individually and organisationally to be martyrs for Christ? When is acknowledged risk too great for our staff? What about the potentially vast legal liabilities World Vision must account for? When do we leave a country or close a programme? When World Vision leaves an area of risk, particularly in the midst of crisis or violent upheaval, the poor with whom we work are rarely permitted or able to flee, no matter how much heartache this injustice causes. World Vision staff can exercise the power of travel, because of resources that include the power of money and visas – resources the poor in crumbling states don’t possess.

Ian Curtis offered the World Vision Partnership some searching reflections as he closed down our work in Iraq in November 2004. Here’s an excerpt of what he wrote:

The intersection between God’s will and that of incarnational ministry together with security raises complex issues for us as an organisation. What does it mean for World Vision to engage in incarnational ministry? This is not a term that we use frequently to describe our ministry or that we would use in interviewing or orientating new senior staff. I am not sure why we don’t. Perhaps we see it as ‘too churchy’, an understandable reaction to the days when the majority of our national directors were pastors [but usually not administrators]. . . . Perhaps we see it as antithetical to our development professionalism paradigm. Perhaps it is because we do not understand what it means in its application on the ground. . .

Seems to me that we believe we are doing it until someone gets killed or looks like they might get killed. Well, on that basis Calvary never would have occurred or been classified as ‘incarnational’. I look at the

ICRC, who both have lost people, including expatriates and locals, who are still maintaining their presence in some way or other. Yet we lose one local and say we are out of there.

What does that say to our Christian staff, to the Church, to our Muslim colleagues when the secular agencies stay and take greater risks in maintaining that presence, but the Christian, sacred agencies leave at the first sign of trouble? . . . Certainly over the years, ICRC have lost a lot more people than we have, yet there is no shortage of Swiss folk lining up to join. Are we worried about legal liability or Christian concern? Are we not deeply enough immersed in missiology to be able to draw the appropriate lessons . . . or do we not see ourselves as missionaries and martyrs?

Ian's heart-searching reflections draw us back to our question – what does it mean for World Vision staff to be credible witnesses for Christ in a violent, dangerous world?

And this brings us back to Jesus, and to Paul who writes in Galatians 2:19–20: 'I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'

#### 4. Implications for risks we take in our witness to God's kingdom

**We live with death already behind us.** We have been crucified with Christ, buried with him through the sacrament of baptism and raised to new life, clothed in the character and life of Christ. For the Christian, whatever loss death threatens has already occurred: We are not our own. The small death yet before us is lesser than the great death we've already walked through. We've already picked up our cross and found that the companionship of Christ makes even this heavy task a source of joy.

*By calling and by choice, we live at risk –  
knowing that ultimately we are beyond  
risk and have nothing to lose.*

**We recognise that the greatest risk is to compromise our commitments.** Jesus warns of gaining the whole world and losing your soul (Matt. 16:26). Now there's a risk! We may be so focused on gaining governments', donors' and communities' acceptance that we fail to witness to Christ and the kingdom. May God save us from this. Compelled by the love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we are rightly driven by this vast, great loving-kindness that never gave up on us and asks only that we willingly pass on to others a share of the gifts we've freely received (time, love, forgiveness, hope, joy, respect as image-bearers of the great God, access to the blessings of this life, and so much more).

Motives other than this compelling Spirit-resourced love can be expected to melt down under the harsh heat of suffering; the cost is simply too high. The only power source that will sustain living, walking sacrifice on an ongoing basis and long-term participation in others' sufferings is the love that flows from the burning heart of God.

*By calling and by choice, we are compelled by  
love, not just concerned with need.*

**We live on the margins, rather than remain seated at centres of power.** Our home is with the homeless and with the God of all those who recognise themselves as empty-handed and powerless before God. Our power is with the poor and those who have been despised and rejected. Our riches are with the resourceless. Our strength is with the suffering.

Of course we're called to witness to those with resources and power. Of course we dine with them, sit with them, walk with them in the



challenges of life. But if we make our home with them – if our identity is wrapped up with the resource-full rather than the resourceless, with the powerful rather than the powerless, with those at the centre of worldly prowess rather than those on the margins – then we run the risk of betraying our witness to God’s kingdom.

*By calling and by choice, we make ourselves vulnerable – for we are followers of the God who is well content with weakness.*

**We pursue long-term gain rather than short-term gain.** Knowing that we live on the side of the future, we allow certainties of the future to shape our commitments in the present. If transformed individuals continue to be confined by oppressive systems, then they’ve not yet experienced life in all its fullness. Therefore, God propels us to take the risk of stewarding our influence in communities and countries for long-term systemic change.

It is not our job to bring the kingdom of God, but it is our job to live today as citizens of the kingdom of God and to accurately represent kingdom expectations and values. World Vision pursues strategies to enhance nation-building and society-shaping, not for the sake of powers and principalities, but for the sake of incarnating kingdom values in our present life and to provide for the well-being of vulnerable people who will be better protected by the rule of law, peaceable governance and adequate infrastructures of civil society.

But watch carefully as genuine transformation alters power dynamics. Tyranny of every stripe relies on fear and intimidation. In all of Scripture, whenever messengers of God break into this world with ‘gospel’ or good news, the first words from these angels’ mouths are ‘Do not be afraid’. The gospel brings courage and, as we have noted, constant reminders of how little we have to lose in pursuing radical transformation. Obviously, some people will be threatened and angered by our actions.

*By calling and by choice, we live with  
boldness because we know both  
the future and the Lord of the future.*

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What steps can we take to be a people and an organisation that willingly embraces such risk? Spiritual nurture and Christian formation amongst World Vision staff are a life-sustaining essential crux of our mission – and our preparation for mission. Together we must throw off all idols that lure us to security and success. We throw off the old self that lures us to power, control and safety. We are reminded daily that we've been crucified with Christ.

The beginning point of staff security isn't decisions about risk management made in the Global Centre, board rooms, or national headquarters. The foundations for real staff security are laid in hiring and nourishing staff who are compelled by the love of Christ and empowered by the Spirit of Christ; staff who embrace the call of Christ to be witnesses with the poor; staff for whom death is behind them and irrepressible fullness of life ahead.

## CHAPTER 8

# Disaster Relief: Credibility in the Heat of Crisis

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*How do you respond to the spiritual dimensions of a  
humanitarian crisis without exploiting people's vulnerability?*

Every humanitarian emergency is also a spiritual crisis. Community members – both victims and observers – inevitably ask questions and offer opinions about God's role in the disaster. Why did this happen? Why didn't God intervene? Where is God in the midst of it? What does God want to see happen as a result of it?

These questions emerge regardless of one's faith and even regardless of the scale of the disaster, whether a personal diagnosis of cancer or a massive earthquake that leaves thousands dead and millions homeless.

Not to offer resources in response to the spiritual dimensions of the crisis is as heartless as not to offer food to someone who is starving.

Yet, this isn't easy. The role of international relief and development organisations has significantly changed in recent decades. Much of our work occurs in contexts of crisis and violence, conflicting religious and

political ideologies, and escalating distrust and insecurity. To engage even as a faith-based organisation can put our lives and our work at risk, let alone to push even further and seek to engage with the spiritual needs of community members.

We at World Vision believe that God suffers with the poor and oppressed. The grace and mercy we receive from Jesus Christ compel us to respond to suffering in the world. Inspired by Christ, we are empowered to love our neighbours. World Vision is committed to assisting children and their communities to experience life in all its fullness – for this is the expressed will of God through the ages, as recorded throughout the Bible. World Vision’s hope and prayer is that our lives and programmes faithfully express the quality of life found in Christ and that people will be encouraged to respond to the gospel.

*“The grace and mercy we receive from Jesus Christ compel us to respond to suffering in the world.”*

Respecting the dignity of those with whom we work, we do not exploit vulnerability or use the power of relief, development and humanitarian programmes to induce conversion. That dishonours those we serve and it dishonours the gospel itself.

Coerced conversion is no conversion at all.

As an expression of the church on special assignment to work amongst the poor and oppressed, Christian organisations such as World Vision are privileged to make a distinctive contribution in these contexts in credible witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Alone, we cannot and do not intend to fulfil all aspects of the church’s mission and witness. We seek to be faithful to our particular calling, and with the entire church to present a holistic and complete witness that is faithful to Jesus our Lord.

## 1. Opportunities for Witness

**We work where churches cannot go.** Though World Vision may face restrictions on public, verbal witness, we are able to work in sensitive situations where churches are often unwelcome.

**We provide a highly public and visible presence.** World Vision's presence and work are very visible and can heighten people's awareness of the Christian movement and give evidence for its credibility. This also means World Vision programmes are carefully scrutinised by donors, governments, international and religious organisations, and humanitarian monitoring agencies – all of whom have differing expectations.

**We unite diverse Christian groups in a common witness.** The international nature of our organisation means World Vision reflects and engages the diversity of the global church. This creates opportunities to demonstrate to the world the quality of community found in Christ. It also makes World Vision a focal point for disagreement amongst Christians.

## 2. Commitment to Witness

World Vision's response to these opportunities and challenges is shaped by the following commitments:

**All we do is intended to witness to the kingdom of God.** As affirmed in our Mission Statement, World Vision's work of relief, development and advocacy is undertaken to 'promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the Kingdom of God'. Everything we do – healthcare, clean water, education, livelihood sustainability, peace-building, donor engagement and advocacy – is our witness to the will and ways of God. We believe these priorities contribute to God's intentions for human life and point to the coming of God's kingdom. *Witness* is not a separate verbal and spiritual activity. Our witness grows out of our being in Christ, and is only as valid or credible as our being in Christ.

All that furthers justice and contributes to human well-being is a fulfilment of Jesus' prayer of the kingdom: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

**Yet our witness should be intentional and strategic.** Jesus was certainly intentional and strategic, although his strategy confounded prevailing political assumptions, as well as religious assumptions about 'messiah' and 'salvation'. We are called to follow Jesus' ways in our intentions and strategies, turning expectations upside down when necessary as part of our witness.


Simply affirming that everything we do is intended *to* witness to God's kingdom doesn't mean we'll be effective *as* witnesses or accurate in depicting God's kingdom. Therefore, World Vision's Mission Statement affirms that we 'witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word and sign in ways that encourage people to respond to the Gospel'. In World Vision's Policy on Witness to Jesus Christ, we commit that every national office and every programme will develop and implement appropriate strategies for effective witness and expression of our Christian Commitments in their context.

**Therefore**, evaluation of our effectiveness in implementing these strategies is included in regular national office and programme peer review and audits.

**Witness begins with who we are.** Credibility of our witness depends on consistency between our words, deeds and life. This is why World Vision invests significant energy to Christian nurture amongst World Vision staff. This is why World Vision consistently insists on setting time aside for office devotions and corporate prayer. Effective witness depends on World Vision staff developing lives of integrity and compassion that reflect the life and character of Jesus Christ.

*Effective witness depends on World Vision staff developing lives of integrity and compassion that reflect the life and character of Jesus Christ.*

The following chart outlines qualities in the life of our staff that contribute to genuine and effective witness.



<b>Contributors to effective witness to Jesus Christ</b>	
<b>Incarnational life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff live as close as possible to people they serve.</li> <li>• Staff build positive relations of love and respect with community members.</li> <li>• Staff learn local languages and customs.</li> </ul>
<b>Sacramental life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development technology (wells, immunisations, etc.) is accompanied by explanations which point to the activity and character of God.</li> <li>• Staff pray publicly as appropriate in any situation.</li> <li>• Staff ensure symbols present in their homes and offices are contextually appropriate.</li> </ul>
<b>Moral life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Day-to-day staff behaviour reflects biblical values in contextually appropriate ways.</li> <li>• Values in the community become more consistent with primary values of the gospel: love for enemies, concern for the poor, protection of children and women from exploitation, pursuit of justice, care for creation.</li> </ul>
<b>Spiritual life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prayer is integrated into staff activities.</li> <li>• Staff worship and devotions are designed to empower mission.</li> <li>• Staff sustain spiritual growth through the use of spiritual disciplines.</li> </ul>
<b>Church life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christian churches and agencies are brought together for co-operative concern for the poor and especially children.</li> <li>• Credibility of churches is enhanced in the eyes of the community.</li> <li>• Staff actively participate in a local expression of the body of Christ.</li> </ul>

Helping people in need is a basic expression of being created in God's image. 'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. . . . How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?' (1 John 3:18, 17).

In many ways there is nothing uniquely or distinctly 'Christian' about good deeds – providing clean water, immunisation, emergency relief supplies, or micro-loans. But God says God is glorified by compassionate work that is well done. The quality of our deeds gives credibility to our words, and words provide clarity to our deeds.

### 3. Distinctive qualities of 'Christian' relief work

Because World Vision does not proselytise, does not exploit people's vulnerability, and does not use relief aid to incentivise conversion or express religious preference or prejudice, how do World Vision's Christian commitments shape our relief work? The gospel impacts World Vision's work in three obvious ways:

**Our motives.** We seek to express clearly that we are motivated by our love for God and for the people we serve, not simply by a humanitarian desire to 'do good'. Because of World Vision's visibility and the impact of our programmes to enhance people's lives, we find significant opportunity to give testimony to the gospel by broad public communication of World Vision's identity and commitments as a Christian relief and development organisation. Therefore, in all public messaging, our Christian identity is clearly communicated.

**Our resources.** We desire to make evident that our primary resources are not technological or financial, but reliance on the presence and power of God. No human authority has the power to restrict prayer. Intercession is integral to transformational development. Concerted, focused prayer is a central form of witness.

**Our methods.** World Vision intends that our methods do not focus only on 'delivering services', 'meeting needs', and 'implementing programmes', but on caring for people and respecting their dignity and worth.



We aren't providing relief aid so that the world won't disintegrate and threaten existing principalities and powers. We *are* caring for people. We care about learning names, having conversations, listening to people recite their accounts of loss and grief – these are central aspects of our work. Basic respect and curiosity permit us to seek to understand what others believe and how their faith contributes to their lives. By asking the people we serve about the role of faith in their own lives, we nourish mutual learning relationships and create opportunities to talk about the gospel.

In so doing, we hope that we raise the questions in people's minds to which Jesus is the answer. Community partners naturally ask, 'Why are you here? What motivates you? Why do you care for us?'

Our answers are not likely to be 'Oh, humanitarian kindness, I guess'; or 'Affluent charity, of course'. The answers we give echo the love and compassion of God that we've encountered in Jesus Christ. This is the sort of conversation that should be natural and normal to engage in with people regarding the nature and depth of our faith. It is not coercive or dogmatic, confrontational, or even necessarily persuasive in tone. We simply speak of our experience. 'So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ' (Rom. 10:17).

**Our hope.** We expect God's intervention. Recognising the spiritual dimensions of poverty and injustice, we serve in anticipation of God's miraculous acts. Ultimately, people come to faith by the work of God's Spirit – not merely by human witness. The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin and the truth of the gospel, awakens people through dreams and visions, propels people to hunger for righteousness and wholeness, and blesses people with healing and bounty.

*Recognising the spiritual dimensions  
of poverty and injustice, we serve  
in anticipation of God's miraculous acts.*

Because we believe in the supernatural God of creation and redemption, we live with expectation and hope. We expect the miraculous. We pray and act with hope that God will break through in impossible situations. We are confident that God ultimately reigns over human structures and even evil forces. We know that God will not be patient with evil forever.

We know there will be a reckoning, when justice rolls down like a river. We pray and work for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

While not being surprised by suffering and opposition for this present hour, we anticipate God's final victory. And until then, the Spirit of God gives us reasons to share with others the hope that rests within us (1 Pet. 3:15).

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

So how do these convictions shape World Vision's involvement in humanitarian emergencies? Through our organisation's highly visible and carefully monitored work in contexts where churches are not present or lack capacity, we seek and monitor several tangible impacts of our witness.

**Integrity and transparency.** The world looks at the gospel through windows that have been soiled over time – through the conduct of Christians (or those culturally identified as Christian), the conduct of religious people of other faiths, and the prejudices of culture and context. We should not be surprised that the quality and credibility of our life and deeds either add to the grime or help 'clean the windows' so that people can look at Jesus more clearly.

*Therefore*, World Vision utilises focus groups, consultations with community leaders, and regular programme evaluations to discern progress in the areas of transparency and integrity. Where Christians are present in a community, programmes are implemented to strengthen Christian leadership and witness amongst children, youth, and women and men in their community.

**Engagement with churches.** World Vision's access to people and communities with whom the church often has no contact allows us to enhance the visibility and credibility of the gospel and create opportunities for churches to serve and witness.

*Therefore*, intentional strategies are implemented to enhance church leaders' vision for their community and the scope of their church's role in it; to create opportunities for church members to engage with other community organisations on behalf of children; and to equip churches for community leadership.

**Preparation for response.** By the quality of our life and deeds, and by the miraculous signs of God's presence, we often have the privilege of seeing people becoming followers of Christ and experiencing more of life in all its fullness.

*Therefore*, World Vision staff are prepared to respond when community members do indicate a desire to become followers of Christ. Depending on contexts that surround this decision, World Vision staff exercise high levels of sensitivity so as to never endanger or exploit local members of the community.

# Disabilities: Who Is Fully Able?

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*You talk a lot about impact, size and speed of response as an organisation. Yet you are also concerned about those whom many societies marginalise and measure of little value, especially those with physical, mental and psychological disabilities.*

*What makes it possible for you to slow down enough to move with those on the margins?*

Most cultures measure the worth of individuals in the community by productivity, social appeal or attractiveness. The gospel turns these measures of worth on their head: human dignity and worth, along with welcome into relationship with God, are based on God's character and what God has done in Christ, rather than anything we do for Christ.

Few activities disclose this distinction of the gospel more clearly than the witness of how people treat those who may be less productive, or less physically appealing, or more visibly broken.

Just as World Vision's work with those who are poor has taught our staff that we are all on equal footing before God, World Vision's work amongst those with disabilities around the world has taught us that none of us are 'without brokenness'. We all have suffered the disabling of our

bodies and identities that resulted from the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and we stand before God as equals with those whose disabilities are more recognised or feared by the fallen world.

## 1. We all have disabilities

When talking about disabilities, this is the place to begin, a place we often avoid: Not only do we all have disabilities; most likely, all of us will experience impairments as we age. Some disabilities are more visible than others, although invisible disability can be just as stigmatising (e.g. if it affects productivity).


As Christians, we know that the most devastating disabilities in the long term are often disguised or not readily apparent: greed, pride, arrogance, ambition, fear and enmity tragically disable individuals, relationships and entire communities. In our bodies or our characters, in our minds or our emotions, in our attitudes or our aptitudes – we all face limitations.

We all stumble along in the midst of our brokenness towards the fullness of life found in Christ's kingdom. Because we often do not recognise our own limitations and inabilities as such, we pity or even stigmatise others.

We pretend we are whole when we are not. In self-conscious efforts at self-improvement, we try to shore up our weaknesses, play up our best parts, and hide the parts that evoke our shame.

*We pretend we are whole when we are not.*

But the gospel breaks through, catching us off guard by embracing our brokenness. What had been our shame becomes the monument to God's grace in our lives. Therefore, the gospel overcomes all stigmas and prejudices against people with disabilities – whether these are mental, intellectual, emotional, or physical impairments; HIV or AIDS, leprosy,

 drug-resistant TB, or other diseases; or even spiritual impairments (think of Jesus' compassion for the demoniac).

The point is that we are all broken. We can hide, but we cannot heal ourselves.

To stigmatise others for *their* disabilities is ultimately to stigmatise oneself. Furthermore, if one member of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer (1 Cor. 12:26). Anything that thwarts others from flourishing diminishes fullness of life for all of us. But the corollary is that when we provide means for one member of Christ's body to thrive, we all are healthier. A century ago, Maria Montessori was guided by her Christian faith to develop the best education possible for a group of disabled children in her charge, and today we recognise that her work to build more abundant capacities in disabled children's lives can benefit all children's developmental education.

*Anything that thwarts others from flourishing  
diminishes fullness of life for all of us.*

## 2. Christ has 'disabilities'

This second, shocking affirmation acknowledges that not only does the body of Christ recognise shared disabilities and brokenness of all individual members – the gospel affirms that our Lord Jesus Christ willingly shares in our disabilities as well.

We worship the risen Lord, whose hands are permanently wounded, whose flesh has been permanently pierced. 'Look at my hands and my feet', he tells us (Luke 24:36–39). The proof that he is risen isn't simply the empty tomb: it's the wounded body. Jesus was pierced for our iniquity. He carries our wounds. By his stripes we are healed.

The God whom we worship doesn't shun people because of appearance or disability. God doesn't require that before we can stand in the presence of the Holy One, we must be cleansed of all 'abnormalities', all brokenness, all 'defects'. Rather, our Lord Jesus Christ bore the full

weight of all that disables humankind on the cross, and he still carries signs of that in his risen body, his body of glory.

*Therefore*, our disabilities actually draw us into the fellowship of Christ's suffering (Phil. 3:10). Jesus tells us that if we want to find him now, it will be amongst those who are despised, marginalised and excluded. He scandalised others by his willingness to touch and embrace the least celebrated, the least lovely – people who had leprosy, people who were chronically ill or were outcast, even the dead! In fact, we find Jesus, he tells us in Matthew 25, amongst those who are hungry, homeless, naked and captives.

Our challenging call to walk with and love people who are rejected and marginalised is actually the call to walk with and love Christ. He goes so far as to warn that one criterion in the final judgement will be how we walked with those whom society minimises, marginalises and avoids. Scriptures call us to remember that the Saviour of the world was despised and rejected by society (Isa. 53:3).

*Our challenging call to walk with and love people who are rejected and marginalised is actually the call to walk with and love Christ.*

Jesus says outright that when we serve with those who are excluded and treated unjustly, we are serving him. Communion with our Lord isn't found only at the holy mystery of the Eucharist, but also in the mystery of his communion with us in human brokenness. In both, we encounter the broken body of our Lord. In both, we encounter a new vision of 'quality of life', a profound depth of hope, a resilience of love not conditioned on our performance or thwarted by our situation. We preach heresy if our witness suggests that suffering or marginalisation is a sign of God's absence or powerlessness.

Our disabilities are a holy intersection where we can expect to encounter God's presence and redeeming power.

None of this means we resign ourselves to suffering. Jesus' warns that to fail to do what we can to remove barriers others face in accessing fullness of life is to risk barring ourselves from eternal life in God's kingdom. None of us can do everything, and Jesus is not asking this. Each of us can do something. We will be accountable for that.

### 3. God's strength is made perfect in weakness

Surprisingly, through the entire Old and New Testament narratives, God doesn't seem particularly interested in the obvious candidates when it comes to heavenly business. Noah doesn't seem altogether sane to his neighbours. Moses feels like a stutterer in front of crowds and has spent years in exile as a criminal. David is the smallest person on the battlefield and is a shepherd, not a soldier. Jonah and Elijah beg God to send somebody else, because both suspect they might wind up embarrassing themselves and God. The God of the cosmos invades history as the refugee baby of a common labourer in an oppressed minority community.

By this, we learn that the context in which to encounter God's strength isn't where we already feel quite gifted and capable. We seek God's face, his person with our whole heart, in our weaknesses, failures and human imperfections. In our disabilities that are physical or mental, in our attitudes or our emotions, Paul's words ring true: '[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:8–10).

*Therefore*, World Vision treats all people with dignity and respect because of our common life in God's image and our common brokenness. This includes disabled people, people living with HIV, or people who are marginalised. We pray and work for those barriers placed before them to be removed, and that we do not ourselves become or build barriers. We also pray and work for the strengthening glory of God to be manifest in the midst of our weakness. We want to live in such a way that God is glorified in the midst of all disabilities, all suffering, all sorrow.



## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What steps do we take to remove all the barriers that marginalise others? One of our most compelling witnesses to God's kingdom is through removing barriers that stigmatise and diminish people. The church is called to be a barrier-free community that pursues those whom others marginalise, celebrating their lives at the centre of our life together. We do this in four ways:

**We embrace one another in our mutual brokenness.** Because we share in common the reality of our brokenness, whatever manifestations that may take, we live with a deep, tender solidarity.

**We make sure our lives are inclusive and our worship is accessible.** Rather than shunning or avoiding those perceived as different or valued-less, we recognise that in a special way this is precisely where God is found.

**We find the powerful grace of God in our weakness.** The Holy Spirit works within and through us as the body of Christ, strengthening, building up and knitting our lives together in love (Eph. 4:16). When we are discriminated against, excluded and marginalised, the burden is too much to bear alone. But together, we are empowered to find and make tangible for one another the sufficiency of God's grace in the midst of our weakness.

**We break down barriers that block fullness of life.** Rather than ignoring the barriers that exist in society which exclude and marginalise others, we participate in God's obstacle-removing, people-including ministry.

The Holy Spirit builds us up in love, so that rather than permanently and forever stumbling towards the kingdom, we carry one another when needed and move together with joyous certainty towards that day when we'll stand as one, united as the perfect and holy bride of Christ (Eph. 5:27).

# Suffering: The Fellowship of Tears

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*Your work is focused on all the hard things of life that we instinctively want to avoid – disabilities, disasters, injustice, poverty, oppression. That's really depressing. What keeps you going?*

## 1. Life is hard

There's no getting around it. Suffering strikes us all. None of us are protected from pain throughout our entire life. If we are tempted to think someone else's life is easy, we simply do not know them well enough. To live faithfully and fruitfully for Christ, and not be swept off our feet when life gets hard, we must learn how to deal with difficulties. If we can't face suffering, we can't fully face life. If we can't cope with – and even make the most of – adversity, we'll be imprisoned behind the walls we build in futility to attempt to ward off suffering.

What's our reaction when suffering strikes? Commonly, we try to stop the pain, or to spread the blame: God, why did you allow this to happen to me? Yet all suffering is like physical pain – a symptom that something's wrong. Without pain, we might bleed to death without knowing it. Merely deadening pain doesn't solve our problem – in fact, it might

deaden us. Rather, pain catches our attention. It alerts individuals and the community to a need to rally resources for change.

So it is with suffering – it alerts us to the obvious fact that life right now isn't what God intends it to be. Suffering demands a response. People who have learned how to bring comfort to others who are suffering have learned one of their reasons for living.

## 2. Love implies suffering

When we love, we make ourselves vulnerable to others. We open up our lives – to great joy and great sorrow, to deep pleasure and deep hurt. Our choice isn't between suffering and not suffering, but between love and no love. The word 'compassion' means literally 'to come alongside in suffering'. To have compassion, to love means to be able to embrace suffering – our own and others'.

Suffering, rather than robbing us of life as it seems to threaten to do, opens an opportunity for God to work in us to rob suffering of its destructive power. Instead of being diminished through suffering, we experience God's strengthening us, so that even suffering can bear good fruit. This is why Paul says we can rejoice in suffering. Not one pain needs to be wasted. 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom. 8:28).

**God is no stranger to suffering.** In Christ, God not only has carried our suffering through death and into resurrected life – God continues to carry us in our present suffering until we complete our pilgrimage to that farther shore. There is one distinctive and even scandalous Christian answer to the horrific problem of suffering: Christ crucified. Christ bore and redeems our pain – and can still be found amongst people bearing their sin and shame, their pain and sorrow (see 1 Cor. 2:1–2: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified').

We would never embrace senseless suffering. But part of the emotional freedom we experience as Christ redeems our suffering is that it is no longer senseless and it needn't separate us from God or from others. Through whatever pain we encounter, we participate in the life of our Lord at his deepest moment of agony. We experience solidarity with Christ's people, for the one circumstance we are guaranteed to share in this life is suffering. In a great spiritual Mystery, our suffering is joined to Christ's suffering, and together our sorrows and our response to sorrows play some bigger part in the great drama of the universe than is yet evident in human dimensions of space and time (see Job). 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts [literally: 'come alongside with strength'] us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.' (2 Cor. 1:3–5 *NIV*).



**A new reason for living.** Scripture presents a radical revision of our reason for living. Career, success, impact, significance and security all wither in comparison as tiny goals. We are free to find joy in all that jostles and jolts us, plagues and pains us, for the Bible claims that in suffering, we find God. 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' – Christ carrying our burdens. In knowing him, we are enabled and qualified to bear the sufferings of others.

Oppression, chronic poverty, and humanitarian emergencies are theological crises. Behind tears of grief and cries of fear, questions about the nature of God are sometimes shouted (though often whispered). *Why do you allow this horror? Why me? Why don't you stop this? Or, What have I done to deserve this?* Even insurance policies call natural disasters 'acts of God'. What kind of God acts this way – afflicting seemingly innocent people with famines, hurricanes, floods, droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanoes?

People who live in relief settings are almost always victims, because they dwell in vulnerable places, with already overloaded or non-existent infrastructure to mitigate loss of life and resources. Harm comes to them by the blind power of nature or the corrupted power of people. The world

echoes with the tragic repetition of natural and human-caused slaughters of innocents.

In most ways, response to injustice, poverty or humanitarian emergencies is not distinguished by the religious faith of those coming to others' aid. Tents, food, medical care, latrines and child-friendly spaces don't have religious identities. Victims need care – good care and prompt care – and rightly go to whoever seems able to provide for their needs. Therefore, people in need are vulnerable to manipulation by the ideology of providers of aid. As a Christian organisation, World Vision is called to be reliable, effective, prompt, and trustworthy in not exploiting people's need or promoting conversion to our faith. This is the first call of a relief organisation – Christian or not.

In what ways does our faith mark and shape the work we do as World Vision in our work with those who suffer from poverty, oppression and disasters?

## Ordinary steps as credible witnesses to God's kingdom

What steps can we take individually and corporately to grow in this partnership and live out this kind of spirituality in our engagement with suffering?

**We serve as a sacred calling.** Biblical faith proclaims that the suffering of all people, especially the innocent, outrages God. God's will is for humankind and all of creation to flourish, and for people to respond with compassionate care for those who suffer. Relief of suffering is a holy calling, a divine work. It is a very sacred form of service.

*Relief of suffering is a holy calling, a divine work.*

Suffering, rather than revealing an absence of God, is precisely the circumstance where we are most likely to encounter God's presence. Rather than being an expression of divine judgement, we discover in suffering the expression of God's compassion. The crux of the gospel – Christ

crucified – most profoundly reveals the depth of God’s identification with suffering. The Apostle Paul describes God as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our suffering that we might bring comfort to other people in theirs (2 Cor. 1). Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Comforter (John 16) – the one called alongside us to comfort. When we are comforting others in their affliction, we are participants in the work of God.

**We deal gently with people’s sorrows.** Even tears are sacred. We understand we’re encountering the deepest longings and wounds of human hearts. Any reasonably competent organisation can provide tents, food, medicine, water and sanitation. The sacred nature of our calling demands more from us – that we care tenderly for the people we are serving. The proof of our being Christian and the sign of the truth of our religion is our love for widows, orphans and those in distress (Jas. 1:16–17). Christian love is not fully expressed through kind words spoken or kind deeds given to unknown crowds of people – but through tangible care for known individuals. God knows the names of the people who are touched by our lives, deeds and words. In the rush to provide relief assistance to masses of people, we are ever attentive to the individuals within the crowd. God’s love is searchingly personal.

**We celebrate our commonality with those we serve.** Though we may have passports enabling us to exit the disaster, though we’re not trapped in that particular situation – we know the utter depth of our commonality with those we serve. We know that without God’s intervention in our lives we would be trapped in our own personal disasters, in our own fears and devastation, exhaustion, loneliness and pride, our sin and folly. We know that all of us are helpless, needy, and in some way – large or small – suffering.

Thus our service is not charity or benevolence. It’s not condescending kindness. It’s an act of justice – as we seek a ‘fair balance’ in the resources with which people have to live (2 Cor. 8:13–14). There is no power differential between helper and recipient, resourced and resourceless. In World Vision, we know the goods we distribute are donated and not our own. These are gifts we steward – just as God’s grace is freely given in

Christ and is not our own nor ever deserved. Like the people we serve in a humanitarian emergency, we always, daily come empty-handed before God and one another, in need of help.

Suffering levels the ground. Suffering removes all pretense and pride—and suffering usually diminishes dignity as well. Desperate people don't care about dignity any longer. They're focused on survival. Frantic parents will succumb to any humiliation to receive help for their children. Therefore World Vision is prompt to guard the dignity of people we serve.

Child protection is a divine mandate. Rather than dumping relief supplies in the laps of passive recipients, World Vision does all it can to empower child victims to be agents of hope and healing in their own communities. We employ older children and heads of households to rebuild their own and others' homes. We give jobs to victims of disaster to distribute food and emergency supplies. These aren't simply cost-effective managerial methods, but actions rooted in the biblical call to treat people – made in the image of God – with respect. In releasing people's capacity to care for themselves and others, we reaffirm their identity as children of God and point them to God's purposes for their lives.

*World Vision does all it can to empower child victims to be agents of hope and healing in their own communities.*

For the same reasons, we seek to build bridges between people of all faiths. We don't suggest that all faiths, or opinions of any kind, are equally valid. We don't attempt to gloss over real differences in communities' varied belief systems. But we also don't give preference to people who happen to be born into particular cultures or belief systems that line up with our own.

We don't only serve Christians and we don't only partner with other followers of Christ. Humanitarian emergencies are an opportunity for walls of religious differences to be overcome. We offer a cup of cold

water to whoever is thirsty. We serve without any sense of superiority, or any other agenda except to provide water. We partner with everyone whose hearts are broken with the things that break the heart of God. In working together to alleviate suffering, we point to the character and presence of the suffering-bearing God found in Jesus Christ.

**We recognise the sacramental quality of our service.** The Bible proclaims that God is present in suffering. Jesus himself said, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Matt. 25:31–46). These foundations of our faith are worth repeating. Paul says that he sought to know nothing amongst those he served but Christ crucified – bearing their sin, sorrow and suffering – Christ carrying the ravages of demonic and human evil and injustice (1 Cor. 2:2).

If this is true, then there’s something sacramental about serving those who suffer. A sacrament is an outer and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace. A sacrament is a tangible expression of the presence of God. Believing that God is present bearing the pain of those who suffer, our service in Christ’s name is an outer and visible sign of Christ’s inner and gracious presence. When we touch the suffering, we are participating in a holy sacrament.

Therefore, rather than fleeing from suffering, or expecting our faith to protect us from suffering, we are propelled by the Spirit of God to enter in and share others’ suffering. As the Father sent the Son into the world to bear sin and suffering and to defeat evil, so we are sent by the Son in the power of the Spirit (John 20:21). We are sent to participate in God’s work of alleviating pain, soothing suffering, providing food for those who are hungry, replacing tears with clean water, bringing reconciliation to conflict, inspiring hope in those who’ve lost a sense of the future to be filled with hope and promise. Our deeds of love become sacred deeds. And sacred deeds provide evidence of God’s presence in the midst of hopelessness, despair, suffering and even death.

To choose to serve in the deserts and conflict of Darfur and Somalia, the devastation of Haiti, in flood-, earthquake-, and conflict-ravaged Pakistan, or the chaos of Afghanistan obviously entails significant self-sacrifice, often on the part of entire World Vision families rather than



just an individual humanitarian worker. The real cost, and sense of loss, is a suffering our staff share with community members who also suffer loss and extended familial separations due to economic devastations or other circumstances. The way of the cross is the way of sacrifice – but it is also the way of Communion. Sacrifice creates not emptiness, but opportunity for us to become tangible expressions of the ‘broken body and spilled out blood’ of Christ for the needy. Our engagement in relief becomes a form of communion both for us and for those we serve.

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**We persist with resilient hope.** Christian faith proclaims that suffering, evil and injustice are not the last word in human existence. We know that one day, all sorrow will cease, all suffering will end, all evil will be vanquished and all tears wiped away (Rev. 21:3–5). We live now, in the meantime, when all of creation is groaning in travail awaiting the fulfilment of the world’s redemption. But we live now in light of the certain future.

This is the non-aggressive confidence in which World Vision serves. Tender hope marks our lives and work. We want to serve with a gentle joy, knowing we are engaged in a holy privilege when we care for those who suffer. We touch eternity hidden beneath the time-wounded horrors of war, disaster and famine-ravaged human lives. Our small service is given as a sign that one day this suffering will cease. We are providing evidence of the future when ‘all will be well and all manner of things will be well’, in the ancient words of Julian of Norwich.

Because we are reaching out to touch eternity, we can’t help but engage spiritually with people. We ask our staff to engage in constant, though usually silent, prayer for those we work alongside and for our own endurance and wisdom. We pray for the Father of mercies, the suffering-bearing Saviour, and the comforting Spirit to sustain us all. We pray for God’s kingdom to come against the forces of evil that contribute to people’s suffering. Our spiritual engagement with people is enlarged as

we provide opportunities for them to talk about the deeper questions and spiritual resources they may have – exploring together how they deal with the issues of faith and hope, forgiveness, and the future. It's deepened even further when they invite us to pray with them.

This creates freedom for us to grow together in our dependency on God. When people see our dependency, we give them hope. Otherwise, they might be deceived into thinking our capacity to care stems from affluence and citizenship – rather than from our shared humanity; our common pilgrimage; our sense that the suffering of one region wounds the whole world and the healing of one brings greater health to all; our spirituality and discipleship; and our dependency on Christ that nourishes our ability to serve. We want others to see that we stand together in common neediness. Through this, we extend to them equal access to hope.

World Vision's response to suffering, injustice and humanitarian emergencies expresses God's holy opposition to all that thwarts people from experiencing life in all its fullness. When faced with seemingly intractable problems and insurmountable suffering, we serve with bold confidence that we are walking in the will and ways of God.

*World Vision's response to suffering, injustice and humanitarian emergencies expresses God's holy opposition to all that thwarts people from experiencing life in all its fullness.*

## CONCLUSION

# Hope Fulfilled

**Extraordinary witness in ordinary ways:  
What we wish people would say about us**

*It often seems like the pessimists and sceptics have all  
the ‘facts’ on their side. Yet you persist in hope.  
Why do you remain so joyfully hopeful?*

The gospel calls us to give thanks in – and even for – everything, to rejoice always, and to continually be ready to give an account for the hope that is in us. Nothing is more compelling than the witness of joyful hope in the midst of grave difficulty. In many ways, the desired ‘product’ of World Vision’s work is the joy that comes when people’s hopes are fulfilled. What makes this possible?

“ *Nothing is more compelling than the witness of  
joyful hope in the midst of grave difficulty.* ”

### 1. Why are you so hopeful?

Several years ago, Abuna Manuel, Catholic priest of Gaza, requested funds from World Vision for playground equipment. His request didn’t fit clearly into our programme priorities and operating plans. Of all the

needs in Gaza for healthcare, employment, food security, sanitation – let alone peace and justice – a request for playground equipment seemed somewhat frivolous. On a trip to Gaza, I asked about this and was struck by his wise reply. ‘Play is the gate to laughter, laughter leads down the path to joy, and joy is the door to hope. Without hope, we have no life. The children of Gaza have lost their capacity to play. We must help them play again.’

Our goal isn’t simply to help children be little adults, with marketable skills and community leadership. Jesus calls us to help children be children again. His followers, he says, must receive the kingdom like little children, and so we are called to recapture all that delights God in children.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). The gospel sings with the resounding song, ‘thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him’ (2 Cor. 2:14). This song of thankful praise echoes the eternal song before the Lamb of God in the book of Revelation.

We celebrate the gospel as the proclamation of a hope so solid nothing can shake it. ‘We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken’ (Heb. 12:28). We are admonished in 1 Peter 3:14–15: ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you’. We speak of living in a way that raises the questions in people’s minds to which Jesus is the answer. One of those questions is certainly, ‘What makes you so hopeful?’

Am I hopeful? Are you? What must occur in my life in order for me to be resolutely hopeful? If hope is a fruit of my circumstances, then hope will be as precarious as the potential threats to my current situation – an accident? an illness? an attack?

Often it seems like our hope is only as solid as our savings accounts and all our personal, physical as well as emotional security systems. For most of the world’s poor, that kind of hope is hopelessly inaccessible. Is there

any hope for those who live in constant threat – or are the violence of desperation or the cancer of cynicism the only options?

If unshakable hope is viable, how do we live that, especially if we feel like our own lives have become entangled in a hopeless web of problems, pain and troubles? When we feel snared in the trap of our circumstances, how can we access hope, much less bring hope to others?

**The tension on a spider's web.** When Israel was trapped in captivity in Babylon, God gave the people profound words of guidance through the prophet Jeremiah. These verses have been sources of comfort to suffering people for thousands of years: 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope' (Jer. 29:11). 'Hope' in Hebrew is a wonderful picture word, describing the tension of a spider's web. When disconnected from one end, the web is weak and easily broken. When firmly anchored between two points and stretched tight, the web can bear great weight. Hope, then, is to be stretched tight between two places – firmly anchored in both the present and the future.

When we feel trapped in a web of circumstances, the strands of that web itself become the pathway for hope. As the New Testament Book of Hebrews says, the hope that we have in Jesus Christ is 'a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered' (Heb. 6:19–20). An utterly reliable anchor! Firmly fixed in heaven! By the grace of God our lives are secured with a firm hope fixed in an utterly good future. Sometimes, a Christian's strong sense of unshakeable hopefulness can even be annoying. We've all experienced moments when someone says, 'Get more realistic. How can you be so certain?' The tension on a spider's web explains this hope in the larger world.

Years ago, our daughter's bedtime interrupted her reading of an exciting chapter in a book. I insisted it was time to go to sleep. She replied, 'There's no point in me turning out my light. I'm in the midst of an exciting part, and if I stop reading, I won't be able to sleep. I'll be crabby in the morning when I get up, will probably fall asleep in school, and it'll

be all your fault 'cause you made me stop reading!' I assured her she was a clever girl, could solve her own problem, and needed to turn her lights out in five minutes. In the morning, she cheerfully bounced down the stairs. I commented, 'You obviously had a good night's sleep. How did you solve your problem with the book?'

She replied, 'It was easy, Daddy. All I did was read the last chapter! After that, knowing how it ended, I slept great. I thought it would spoil the book, but instead, I can't wait to read the rest tonight to find out how the author gets the characters out of the mess I left them in – into such a great ending.'

I realised in our daughter's resolution of her dilemma that God has similarly resolved ours. We are the people who have read the Last Chapter (or more accurately, the last page of the Preface). We know our personal future: One day we will stand in the presence of God clothed in the glory of Christ (Col. 3:4). We also know the world's future: 'He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. . . . See, I am making all things new' (Rev. 21:3–5).

## 2. Living without fear and rebelling against the *status quo*

Ultimately, at the end of the book of our days, we have nothing to fear. The future holds neither terror nor mystery. The short-term is absolutely laden with drama, with peril, with the unknown – most likely filled with great joys and deep sorrows. But because the Last Chapter is known, we can walk through the remaining chapters with anticipatory delight, living even our pain to its fullest, wanting to experience and learn from everything as we're en route to the glorious future that is yet to come.

The horrors of violence and terrorism in our world can make us wonder if we've heeded the 1980 United States Presidential Commission on World Hunger:

The most potentially explosive force in the world today is the frustrated desire of poor people to attain a decent standard of living. . . .

Promoting economic development in general, and overcoming hunger in particular are tasks far more critical to national security than most policy makers acknowledge or even believe. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, we have been conditioned to equate national security with the strength of military forces. This prevailing belief is a simplistic illusion.

Hope doesn't cause giving in to suffering, or resigning ourselves to 'our lot in life'. Rather, hope frees us to live in joyous rebellion against all that keeps life from becoming what God intends it to be.

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Knowing the Last Chapter makes all the difference! My wife and I visited the Khao I Dang refugee camp where 100,000 Cambodians wallowed between a violent past and an uncertain future. We have never forgotten the singing at the church of Jesus Christ for Refugees, where they gathered for hours a day to sing. We sensed that their praises to God were like food and nourishment. After one of the services, my wife spoke with Samnang, a Cambodian whose wife had been raped and killed before his eyes by the Khmer Rouge. His children had died, one by one, as they escaped with him to Thailand. Now, as a single male, he existed in the refugee camp without a country, a family, a home, a possession, or any hope of being sponsored to a third country. His future was to wait in the refugee camp until international politics pushed him back into Cambodia. My wife asked quietly, 'Samnang, how do you face such a future?' He replied intensely, with passion, 'Jesus is my future, and he is enough.' Samnang bore witness that hope – mysterious hope, confounding hope, even joyous hope – can be sustained in the midst of life's harshest realities of pain and suffering. We in World Vision don't need to insulate ourselves from life in order to preserve our hope.

**Bold confidence.** We are set free to live through our present difficulties with boldness and confidence. Paul proclaimed to persecuted Roman Christians the good news that by faith we stand in grace, surrounded by the goodness and mercy of God, ‘we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us’ (Rom. 5:1–5 *NIV*).

We may understand rejoicing in hope, but rejoicing in suffering is an extraordinary gift. We rejoice because even suffering can bear good fruit in our lives, and because nothing separates us from the love of God. The Spirit of God pours into us God’s assuring love, reminding us that all things will be well. Hope itself is a fruit of the Spirit – a gift coming from the power of God poured into our lives.

*We may understand rejoicing in hope, but  
rejoicing in suffering is an extraordinary gift.*

Our world is filled with trapped people. We have the privilege of allowing the Spirit of God to give us vision, courage and creativity to respond with the resources of God. That is how we witness to the credible hope of God’s coming kingdom. And that is how those who are suffering bear witness to us and all God’s saints. We do all we can to get people out of the situations that entrap them, not as an escape from life, but as an entrance into fullness of life. We work to remove all obstacles so that, together, we can journey forward in the life God intends for all humankind.

Together, we rejoice in hope, and even rejoice in suffering. We grow from strength to strength, stretched between the turmoil of the present and the grand celebration of the future we know is coming, when all things are made new. The *dynamis* (power) of the Spirit builds our capacity to rejoice even in suffering (Rom. 5:3). God’s power, focused through us in the lives of people right in front of us, brings joy and hope. This joy



flows from assurances and small glimmers that one day, all things will be well. Christ is risen. God's kingdom is at hand. We bring good news to the poor. Captives and the oppressed are being set free, beginning even now. Now, 'may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:13).



## About the Author

Tim Dearborn has served with World Vision for more than 10 years, currently as Partnership leader for Christian Commitments for World Vision International as part of the WVI president's executive office. He holds a Ph.D. in systematic theology from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, master's degrees in mission and in the history of religion from Fuller Seminary and Harvard University, and a degree in history from Whitman College. Tim has been an ordained minister with the Presbyterian Church (USA) for 35 years. Prior to his current appointment at WVI, he served as a professor at Seattle Pacific University, Fuller Theological Seminary, Regent College, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, and the Faculte de Theologie Evangelique in Paris; and at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle as its first Pastor of Urban and Global Mission. He has authored seven books on spirituality, globalisation and mission-related issues and has been married for 40 years to Kerry Dearborn. They have three grown daughters, two sons-in-law and a growing number of grandchildren.

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