

Change the World: A Call to Action

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Ever dream of combating poverty head-on? Feel powerless to reduce human suffering? Want to make a difference in the world? Then this article is for you. The central thesis comes from the great Mahatma Gandhi who envisioned each of us as the solution to global suffering: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." My interest is not so much to articulate or debate the theological foundations of Mormonism today, but to share examples of praxis, i.e., applications of LDS doctrine in the real world that build socio-economic justice. I hope these illustrations may inspire readers to become "doers of the word," not just hearers. Maybe they will serve as images of potentiality, inspiring others to design new interventions for bettering the world. As I put the finishing touches on these pages, the year is almost over. However, I have had some remarkable encounters with individuals over the past two months who have sought to actively engage their beliefs in new and creative activities that may evolve into life-long traditions. Dozens of LDS families have contacted me to say they decided to forgo Christmas gifts for each other, which they had done in the past, and instead, pool the monies they would have spent to fund one of our village banks in Latin America. Theirs is a gift that will keep on giving because when the first 15-20 loans are paid back with interest, another round of loans can be distributed to start another cluster of poor women. Some innovative neighbors this year collected micro-banking funds as private citizens who just happen to belong to the same Relief Society up on the Provo bench. Another is a clan-like structure of individuals from both Salt Lake and Utah counties that calls itself the "One Heart/One Mind Action Group." They too have raised funds for microfinance for the first time this year. Yet another group committed two weeks ago to fund the \$150 purchase of an Alpaca for an orphanage high in the Peruvian Andes where dozens of indigenous children are in need. By breeding several new Alpacas, a small herd will eventually grow, providing milk and meat for consumption, along with the shearing of wool to be sold in the market for a good return as craftswomen then produce sweaters, scarves, and so on. Some could give generously, others as young couples still getting careers started could only give \$20. One young man in the family who suffered unemployment and health problems through most of 2006 donated the entire \$50 his parents gave him for Christmas to help buy a second Alpaca.

Approaching midnight at this moment, it is the wrapping up time of a number of marriages my students invited my wife, Kaye, and I to attend this month—temple sealing ceremonies, wedding receptions, costume balls, and so on. I've been so impressed with their desires to reform the traditional U.S. marriage industry. New, innovative and Zion-like experiences have emerged from their creativity and commitment to doing good. In one case, the card at the marriage banquet informed us that in lieu of a traditional favor for each guest, the bride and groom "have made a contribution on your behalf to [Save Darfur](#)." The couple also plans to dedicate a month next summer doing village development in Africa. Different newlyweds, also married today, had contacted me weeks ago for advice on where they could serve an impoverished community as volunteers next

semester for four months, rather than go on a 10-day honeymoon of luxury in the Caribbean which would cost about as much.

Tonight, at the last wedding of the year we attended, still another couple sought our input in finding them internships in India where they hope to combat poverty for a six month period. In their announcement in the mail, the only wedding gift they had asked for was a donation to the Provo Food and Care Coalition, or travel money to get them to Bangalore, India. In yet another case, some young friends in New York emailed me asking what NGO I would recommend to which they could contribute. They had prayerfully decided that rather than purchase a \$5,000 diamond ring, they would give that amount to help reduce human suffering in the Third World.

With such young students and friends, I often feel I am literally in the presence of the millennial generation of whom the prophets of old foresaw in vision. These Latter-day Saints are acutely aware of war, poverty, and hunger. More importantly, they understand that they can “be the change” for which Gandhi called.

As a professor to many such individuals, I’ve been blessed to stand on hallowed ground in a classroom, instructing them, and more importantly, learning from their insights. Together we have focused on key theories and paradigms for understanding global problems. Debates have arisen about conceptual frameworks for changing society. Jointly we have developed cutting-edge methods and tools for building family and community self-reliance in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Innovative, radical strategies for alleviating poverty have been explored: microcredit, literacy, fair trade, women’s empowerment, participatory research, worker-owned cooperatives, sustainability, humanitarian interventions, and the socio-economics of Zion. In classrooms and outside we have come to embrace the prophetic teachings of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Gordon B. Hinckley, along with spiritual leaders such as the Dalai Lama who suggests that, “In times of need, one should rise to the occasion and fight bravely for what is right.”

For readers and bloggers of *By Common Consent*, my goal is this brief piece is to simply share a few examples of what you may consider doing, through stories and websites where more information may be accessed. I’ve been impressed by seeing the articles of my co-author and friend, Jim Lucas. Together we wrote *Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World*, and I continue to admire his thinking. To read the blogs from so many readers has been enjoyable. In future writings over the coming weeks, I hope to address several points about which some of you raised questions — on microcredit, united order practices, and additional methods for alleviating poverty. Insights about them will serve to explain strategies which I sometimes call “The Mormon War on Global Poverty.”

For now, let me highlight two wonderful cases of LDS humanitarian outreach in which caring individuals came together to diminish pain and hardship, and build social justice. One occurred after Hurricane Mitch swamped much of Central America at the end of 1998. Mitch killed over 20,000 people, left an equal number missing, and a million homeless. When the next semester began in January 1999, my students and I launched a new elective that we initially called the “Stewardship Project” to aid those who suffered. We picked out the most devastated country, Honduras, and formed seven teams to plan the process—fundraising, logistics, Honduran culture, PR, microcredit systems, organizational behavior skills such as teambuilding, etc. Campus bureaucrats said we would be unsuccessful, that these were “just students, not development experts,” and

predicted that sufficient money could not be raised, nor would students volunteer. But pessimism clouded their assumptions. In fact, they were flat-out wrong.

Instead of no students, some 85 attended the class and planned the process, many without even getting course credit because the add deadline had passed before they heard about the opportunity. We raised \$116,000 and some 46 volunteers went to Central America for six weeks of service, or more. We funded nearly a hundred village banks, and gave 20,000-plus hours of community service—shoveling mud out of schools, teaching English and computer skills, volunteering in orphanages, and even delivering babies!

The experience was so successful that we formed additional projects the next year and went to four countries with 86 volunteers and in excess of \$200,000—to Venezuela, Peru, El Salvador, as well as back to Honduras. The name changed to H.E.L.P. International (Help ELiminate Poverty), and we spun it off from BYU so we could be more independent and innovative. Since that time we have trained and sent more than 500 volunteers as a kind of Mormon Peace Corps. Other countries we have worked in include Brazil, Guatemala, and Bolivia. In 2006, as with each of the past 7 years, our HELP International volunteers provided amazing service to poverty-stricken families. This past summer some fifty young people spent at least 6 weeks in either Uganda, Guatemala or El Salvador—training the poor in business skills, setting up family-based Square Foot Gardens, teaching English, and launching other efforts to lift those who struggle. Over the years many of these individuals have had a life-changing experience, and returned home to design and implement other humanitarian projects with college friends, family members, or with business associates in their new jobs after graduation. They have come to understand what Henry David Thoreau meant when he said, “Live the life you have imagined.” Readers may learn more at [HELP’s website](#) .

For other students and I, a highlight of 2005 was establishing a new social venture by mobilizing, organizing, and training young LDS social entrepreneurs to help rebuild after the horrific Asian tsunami of 12/26/04. The destruction was terrible, killing or causing the disappearance of 260,000 people, and bringing about the loss of billions of dollars in housing, businesses, and so forth. For us it was a tough, but inspiring experience. Out of my BYU course, “Becoming a Global Change Agent,” grew a little band of some 35 registered students. To counter the terrible waves of destruction, our project became called a “Wave of Hope.” Out of it we formed a new NGO known as “[Empowering Nations](#).” From those pioneering individuals, the number of campus participants grew to around 60. Eventually about a hundred individuals raised the funds and volunteered for a month or more rebuilding villages and devastated lives along the hard-hit coast of Khao Lak, Thailand. Led by BYU student leaders such as Sarah Carmichael, Mike Poelman, and Natalie Wilson, we were from 7 countries, as well as from other universities between Cambridge and Berkeley. Kaye and I led a team of a dozen older Latter-Day Saints—housewives, entrepreneurs, CPAs, and consultants, as a sort of “Joseph Smith Tsunami Rescue Brigade” to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Prophet’s birth last year.

We all labored together to empower the survivors along the Indian Ocean’s coastline. Horrified by the scenes of destruction we shed tears at the Buddhist temple where thousands of bodies still awaited ID, burial, or cremation. It was a deeply meaningful event for many who gained a new understanding of the Joseph’s enlarged view about families. Instead of the narrow perspective that so many of today’s church members hold, often limited to focusing on their little nuclear family group, the Prophet’s vision was more expansive: “A (person) filled with the love of God is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole

world, anxious to bless the whole human race.” We studied and then put into practice his extraordinary principles of consecration and stewardship by serving the poorest of the poor, individuals who had indeed lost everything—family members, homes, and so forth. In genuinely spiritual ways we experienced the very essence of Christian life, and the sheer joy and sense of fulfillment to be had through true discipleship.

Together with other volunteers, we succeeded in constructing 120 new houses, cleaned miles of debris from area beaches, engaged in reforestation efforts, reopened and taught at damaged schools, established income-generating projects, and labored alongside villagers who we taught how to operate power tools and woodworking skills to make replacement furniture for their homes. Many of us came to understand Anne Frank’s poignant words from her diary: “How wonderful it is that no one need wait a single moment to improve the world.”

If readers wish to learn more about this project, you can [read the full story](#). Inspired by the impacts of that experience, Empowering Nations expanded in summer 2006 to other nations, most volunteers serving for a month in Ghana, but in Panama, and back to Thailand, as well.

I would enjoy hearing from those who have questions about these efforts, or who might consider joining us at HELP International or Empowering Nations during summer 2007 if you are interested. As we do every year, we will be planning humanitarian expeditions to combat poverty in a number of Third World locations.

Together we can indeed change the world!