

75 years of Loving our Neighbour through PWS&D

By Guy Smagghe, Director, Presbyterian World Service and Development

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus told us that this, along with loving God, is the greatest commandment. It is also a hard one, as our society continuously encourages us to look primarily after ourselves.

We hear our politicians say “we will only do something if it is in Canada’s interest,” “we will agree only in our province’s interest”. Honestly, it irks me when I hear those phrases, as they encourage us to close our minds to the needs of others, of our neighbours nearby or far away who may actually need a little more compassion and solidarity from places like Canada.

We live on a relatively small planet in a vast universe. How is our human family doing on this small planet?

It is a pretty uncomfortable question to answer, given the divisions we have created for ourselves, all these little kingdoms that prevent us from working together for the greater good of all.

The recent pandemic has brought to light the injustices and inequalities in access to health services, and to vaccines in so many countries. Did you know that only 4% of the population of Malawi has been vaccinated so far?

How are we caring for our neighbours?

Can we begin to think differently and to put the well-being of all ahead of our own self-interest? Jesus called us to care for our neighbour as ourselves. How can we do that?

Isn’t my neighbour not only the one who lives next door, but also the one who is living in a slum in India?

- the one affected by drought in a remote rural area of Malawi?
- the one who had to leave her home in Syria to seek refuge in Lebanon?
- the one who can’t find enough food to feed her family in Afghanistan?

Jesus was indeed also referring to all of them when he asked us to love our neighbour. Can I love my neighbour but be indifferent to his sickness ... to her hunger?

For the last 75 years, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has acted on this call from Jesus by setting up mechanisms for relief and development internationally so that we can reach our neighbours in need, wherever they may be.

Eventually, this became known as Presbyterian World Service & Development, an effective way that allows each one of us to respond to Jesus' call to action to love our neighbour.

How did this all begin?

In 1947, Europe had been devastated by World War 2, and desperately needed assistance. The church asked every congregation to collect gifts to provide relief to Europe. This endeavour became known as "Canadian Church Relief Abroad" of the Board of Evangelism and Social Action.

In 1968, the General Assembly responded to the emerging needs of the Nigeria-Biafra crisis. The sum of \$7,500 was given to provide relief supplies for Biafra in early 1968, particularly to support the work of Canairelief.

In 1970, the church recognized that it was not sufficient to respond only to emergencies. That year, the General Assembly report stated, "Although emergency feeding and housing are important, more and more we see the need and the benefit of *development* aid — seed, fertilizer, plants, pesticides, farm machinery and experts to teach their uses, digging new wells for drinking water and irrigation purposes, the prevention of soil erosion, and increasing fertility for crops."

We are a small denomination, and on our own, our outreach would be very limited. But the PCC has always been known for punching above our weight. We do that, first because Presbyterians are extraordinarily generous, and see relief and development as fundamental to living out our call from Christ. And second, because we have learned how to work in partnerships that exponentially improve our ability to respond.

By 1980, the General Assembly had accepted a recommendation to change the name to the Committee on Presbyterian World Service and Development – not quite the catchiest name or acronym (PWS&D!) but one that captures well who we are. By the way, our website does have a catchier name – if you search WeRespond.ca you will find us.

It is at that time that we started receiving funding from the government of Canada through the Canadian International Development Agency (known then as CIDA). This allowed us to start engaging with partners on multi-year projects, which meant that we began making a more sustainable difference in the lives of those to whom we reached out.

PWS&D joined the Canadian Foodgrains Bank in 1993. The Canadian Food Grains Bank combines the work of almost 30 Canadian Christian churches, working together to end world hunger.

Soon after, we were leading large food shipments to North Korea – 5 million dollars' worth of grains shipped yearly from Canada for the starving population of North Korea.

This continued for 10 years as we coordinated efforts with the Mennonites and the United Church. Matching funds from the Canadian government helped us tremendously to achieve this large-scale response, something we couldn't dream of doing on our own. Such an operation was risky, but strong cooperation and the establishment of a local office to coordinate activities made it possible to reach out to those who were facing drastic food shortages.

I have had the opportunity to visit our partners in India many times over the years. One of the programs we had was the community health program in the tribal areas of central India, in and around Jobat.

It was Pauline Brown, a Canadian nurse sent as a missionary by the church, who introduced us to the area; and for many years we helped to train community health workers who reached out into rural villages, identifying the health needs, and teaching families how to stay healthy, and where to seek medical attention when needed. They particularly focused on maternal health, ensuring healthy pregnancies and healthy deliveries, thereby reducing the number of maternal and infant deaths. We have since undertaken similar maternal and child health programs in Afghanistan and in Malawi, with great life-saving and life-changing results.

An event of particular significance for the world and for PWS&D took place in 2004, on the morning of Boxing Day, when the news came that a great earthquake and tsunami occurred in the Indian Ocean. For many of us, it was the first time we grasped the biblical magnitude of a tsunami. We were immediately in contact with our partners in Tamil Nadu, India, to find out what the situation was – and it was bad. Thousands of fishermen along the coast had suddenly lost relatives, homes, livelihoods. We quickly joined with the Anglicans, the United Church, and the Mennonite Central Committee to

create a joint response, and put together a 6 million dollar proposal to the Canadian government.

For the next five years, we engaged in rebuilding houses, building community shelters, training youth in trades other than fishing, providing nets and boats to those who would continue to fish, supporting women in establishing small businesses, and providing psycho-social care for so many who had experienced loss and trauma.

Our joint initiative, known as PUMA (standing for Presbyterian, United, Mennonite, and Anglican) ended up being the largest that the Canadian government funded in India in its tsunami response. We were able to do this thanks to the ACT Alliance and our partner CASA in India.

Every year, we respond to large and small disasters around the world, whether or not they are covered in the news. We respond because we are called by our faith to respond. As we read in our *Living Faith* statement: *We cannot claim to love God, whom we do not see, if we hate those about us, whom we do see. Love of God and of neighbour fulfils the law of God.* Through our partnerships with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and the ACT Alliance we have a broad network that gives us the ability to respond rapidly to emergencies. We contribute resources to a Rapid Response Fund at the ACT Alliance, which allocates resources for quick responses to disasters as they happen.

I cannot name the exhaustive list of disasters we've responded to in our history, but I have to mention the Haiti earthquake of 2010, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, and Cyclone Idai in southern Africa in 2019, all of which received generous donations from Canadian Presbyterians.

Unfortunately, there are disasters that are much more complicated to respond to, and that have deeper and more lasting consequences. We tend to call those 'human-caused' disasters as they originate from conflicts that force families to leave their homes, and seek safety far away — sometimes across borders, sometimes for many years, sometimes indefinitely.

On September 2nd, 2015, a 3-year old Syrian refugee boy named Alan Kurdi died in the Mediterranean Sea. His body washed up on a beach in Turkey. Alan and his family were Syrian refugees trying to reach Europe from Turkey. This event was a trigger for Canada to wake up to the tragedy of the Syrian refugee crisis.

PWS&D and the Presbyterian Church in Canada scaled up their refugee sponsorship efforts to respond to the needs. Prior to that, we had one part-time staff focusing on refugee sponsorships; now we have two full-time staff dedicated to that ministry.

As we speak, we are looking to support sponsorships of Afghan refugees, but there are many roadblocks. Canada has come short so far in meeting its promise to bring in 40,000 refugees from Afghanistan, with only 15% of that number having arrived so far. I still receive messages from current and former staff from our partner there, asking us to help them to get to Canada, as their lives are seriously threatened under the Taliban, because their work was linked to our Christian outreach.

PWS&D is also ready to assist people in Afghanistan with food assistance to get through the winter months, but are facing new challenges. The global community faces pressure to prevent a widespread famine that has its origins in global sanctions against the Taliban, which has been labelled as a terrorist group. We hope that our country can soon provide the legal framework to make humanitarian assistance possible, as the vast majority of people in Afghanistan, who are the innocent victims of this tragedy, are facing serious food shortages.

North Korea, Afghanistan — why do we decide to work in those places under such tyrannical regimes? Our call from Christ transcends political differences — a hungry person is a hungry person, and we have an obligation to respond to need regardless of where it occurs. They are our neighbours too, even if they are hard to reach, even if they are not Christians.

So here we are, in 2022, looking back at 75 years of work, and looking forward at the challenges ahead of us. Climate emergencies, political instability, conflict — all of these are creating new parameters with new challenges to reach out to those who are left out.

Christ calls us to turn the tables so that we don't favour economic interests of the few at the expense of those who don't have the basic necessities needed for minimum human dignity — a safe place to stay, access to education, access to health services, access to resources to meet the needs of their families. Christ calls us to name our blessings, and to share our blessings as much as possible. Each child of God is born in a place they have not chosen. For some, it means access to an abundance of resources; for others it means a lifetime of struggle to stay alive.

The church has recognized the need to act so that all children of God may have life with dignity. God has provided us with a planet of abundance, with enough for all. It is our challenge to build bridges of solidarity and to reach out.

Presbyterian World Service & Development is an agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with the mission to build a more sustainable, compassionate, and just world, and more challenges lie ahead. Thank you for being part of this great story of solidarity so far, and, as Jesus invited us, I invite you to continue to love your neighbor — the one you can see and the one you can't see but to whom you can reach out through Presbyterian World Service and Development.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless you, as you continue to accompany us on this journey of solidarity.