

Famine Relief, the Church, and the Environment

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IT'S BEEN COMING DOWN IN BUCKETS for two days. Everyone knows what will happen next: a great slug of water will come roaring down the narrow gullies, accumulating force and volume, finally becoming a full-scale flood crest as the water nears the city. Thoughtful people know that since the last flood the city planning commission has granted hundreds of permits to pave parking lots, put in gutters, build streets, cut forests, straighten river channels . . . and that as a result this one is going to be a real lulu!

The local Corps of Engineers District Operations officer knows the local stake president. He picks up the phone. "Hello, President Jones. This is Captain Williams. We've got a real problem building here. I need 200 men to help fill and place sand bags. Can you get them for me?" "Yes, I can, Captain Williams."

Within minutes the phone chain starts spreading from stake president to bishops to elders' quorum presidents to elders. Within the hour, men begin assembling, ready to work at the designated sites.

Many church members have either been a part of such a scenario or have read about it happening at many natural disasters. Preparedness is a major theme of the temporal welfare program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Working together was the means for survival for thousands of early church members and remains an important tenet of the church today.¹

For many American church members disaster is a fairly remote reality. Nevertheless, electronic communication brings the horror of flood, famine, and war nightly into our livingrooms. How can we as concerned

1. See Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1839-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953); and Garth L. Mangum and Bruce D. Blumell, *The Mormons' War on Poverty: A History of LDS Welfare, 1830-1990* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993).

human beings respond effectively? We've all struggled mentally with the moral dilemma of how we might deal with improvident neighbors in time of disaster. How does the church interpret its responsibility to "do unto others," to "be its brother's keeper"?

Until recently the church's response was relatively ad hoc. President Ezra Taft Benson's role in post-World-War-II relief in Europe is well known. This was clearly a major and very public outreach. But by and large the church has worked within its own ranks, encouraging, supporting, helping in worthwhile but relatively inconspicuous ways. The Welfare Services Office handled whatever needed to be done within established channels.

That is until television made the suffering of the East African people so clear in the mid-1980s. Then a response of a different order of magnitude was called for by the membership. A call went out from the First Presidency for a special day of fasting to generate funds for East African relief. And suddenly in one day in January 1985 the church had over \$6 million on its hands to help those devastated people. Now what?

Glenn L. Pace was assigned to investigate how best those funds could be applied to the problems, as the church then had little formal presence in that area of the world. He spent the next three or four months in Africa, learning about the scope of the problem, who the effective care-givers were, who needed help, what sorts of help would be most effective. Three agencies were singled out for cooperative projects: the International Committee of the Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services, and Africare. The first two were concerned strictly with relief—keeping the people from dying today. Some two-thirds of the money raised went for the purchase and distribution of food, largely grain. Some of those funds went to purchase trucks, others to the expensive process of air-lifting food around rebel blockades. Deliveries were made to Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, and Niger. The other third of the fast-offering went to a major irrigation project in the Wello Province of Ethiopia, under the guidance of Africare. This is development work, as opposed to relief, intended to help the people help themselves. This sort of approach to humanitarian aid is the major focus of the latter part of this essay.

CHANGES IN THE CHURCH WELFARE STRUCTURE

By now the church recognized the need to create a more permanent organization devoted to this kind of effort, and the Humanitarian Services Division was created in the Welfare Services Department. Glenn Pace had by then been called into the Presiding Bishopric, and Ike Ferguson was called to head up the new division. Another fast was called for November 1985, producing another \$4 million. This time the purpose

was to raise funds for "relief and development work in Africa and other similarly distressed regions of the world." The new division had both its work cut out for it and resources with which to do that work.

The Humanitarian Services Division has four focal areas:

1. The well-being and health of women and children. This includes such areas as employment and literacy, as well as physical health.
2. Agricultural production, processing, and marketing (small-scale and family-oriented).
3. Family productivity and employment (enterprise development), and
4. Emergency response.

As a recent example of timely response to an emergency, the large-scale disaster brewing in northern Iraq after Desert Storm was quickly recognized. The Kurdish people needed help. Cooperating with the U.S. government, and working through a Middle-Eastern carrier, the church delivered 13,000 blankets to Kurdish refugees within days of the need becoming known. The church has delivered medical and hospital supplies through Catholic Relief Services and Worldvision. Few Mormons know that part of the church's welfare fund is being spent in this way, despite President Thomas S. Monson's talk to the priesthood at the April 1991 general conference.² No annual report is available for public review, though no effort is made to hide the Humanitarian Services Division's activities from anyone interested to look into them. This appears to be a shining example of "being in the world" and accepting community responsibility, one that would make members proud of the church's performance. In fact, members may now contribute directly to the Humanitarian Services Division on their local tithing/donation slips.

Many projects supported by the division emphasize the needs of women and recognize the role women have as the real but unheralded backbone of many cultures in "less-developed countries." For example, a recent project in Honduras carried out in conjunction with a local agency enabled several village women to set up a savings bank. The long-term purpose was to provide a source of capital for small ventures in the village. To achieve this, the women had to be taught how to evaluate credit-worthiness, how to keep track of principal and interest, how much could be used to re-invest in the business, and how much could be paid to the employees (themselves) for running the operation. The overall cost was \$20,000; the result will be a village with an economic "generator," a group of people able to plan for the future with more certainty. This sort

2. Thomas S. Monson, "A Royal Priesthood," *Ensign* 21 (May 1991): 47-50.

of project has much in common with the approach of the Gramine Bank, started in Bangladesh, which singles out small, innovative projects with only local impact for special attention.³

Such small-scale projects are polar opposites to those of huge agencies such as the World Bank. In recent years protests have led many agencies to change their criteria for project funding. Such organizations are known for having supported such mega-projects as the one to build major roads into the Amazon basin, ostensibly to promote settlement and opportunity for Brazil's poor masses. But such projects actually destroyed major parts of the rain forest and wiped out indigenous peoples, while leaving most of the land in the hands of large landowners and still unsuitable for long-term farming. In addition, gold was discovered in the upper Amazon in 1987, and thousands of miners poured in, bringing urban disease with them. Almost 20 percent of local Yanamamo Indians were killed during the first four years after the road reached them.⁴ Environmental reviews are now standard for almost all funding organizations, but they are only intermittently successful at blocking destructive projects.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY/DEVELOPMENT

It is possible to take an entirely different approach to relief work. Completely different principles can be applied, based on Tom Berry's "mutually-enhancing relationship with the earth,"⁵ rather than applications of Western-style business principles or technologies.

Such an approach is used by the small private organization Land and Water Resources International (LAWRI) based in Lynnwood, Washington. The director, John McMillin, has almost fifty years of experience in famine relief. He began as a teenager, taking a ship load of dried fish from Peru to Europe for starving concentration camp victims. These were not just any dried fish, though. These had been caught and dried by fishermen organized by John's father, who himself had travelled the famine-circuit for years as a special ambassador for the United States in the Foreign Economic Administration. John is clearly a man who learned to think big at a young age.

In succeeding decades John worked all over the developing world,

3. The information on the Humanitarian Services Division of the Welfare Services Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was obtained in telephone interviews with Ike Ferguson, director of the division, and his secretary, Renee Brady, in April and May 1991.

4. Personal conversations with Father Giovanni Saffirio, a Consolata missionary to the Yanamamo, April 1991.

5. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

first trying to "stop the dying," as he put it, then struggling with the ultimate problem: how to get starving people to produce food for themselves. Out of his experience with hundreds of projects, McMillin has come up with an approach which has virtually no glitter. It begins with some of the worst, most abused soils on the planet (though usually not poisoned with toxic wastes, as in so many "developed" countries). It requires no "Green Revolution" special strains of rice or wheat. It requires no petroleum or big tractors, no chemical fertilizer or pesticides, no dams. What it does require is thorough application of the principles of organic farming at its best. The technique is called "intensive integrated agriculture and aquaculture," which means you grow fish and crops together in ways in which the wastes from one are feed for the other.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? In a way, it is. But there are problems. Many have the mistaken impression that indigenous peoples around the world have developed effective ways of farming for their own environments. By and large, this is not true in less-developed countries. Techniques passed down through the generations continue to be applied, far beyond the point at which local soils are able to respond and produce good crops. A typical example is the continual growing of maize in Mexico to a point where the essential trace nutrient zinc is completely removed from the soil. Future crops become progressively more stunted, erosion increases as plants become unable to hold the soil, and the downward spiral continues. Thus, one of the major problems with implementing the LAWRI approach is the need to break old habits.

The fundamental tenets of the LAWRI system are: first, composting everything in sight to develop soil amendments (to put organic material back into the soil, to give it both "tilth" and nutrients). All local waste vegetable matter is used, as well as animal wastes (and eventually, fish meal). And second, double-digging the soil to provide an opportunity for deep penetration of plant roots to help avoid desiccation in dry periods. Local plants are grown in raised beds close together to prevent sunlight from giving weeds a boost. The local area is scanned for plants to grow in companion relationships, to use natural resistance to pests between various species (for example, in temperate climates marigolds and garlic/onions may be used to help keep pests off tomatoes). Even the soil is checked to find strains of local bacteria which can speed up the composting process. In Godino, Ethiopia, such a "star" bacterium reduced composting times by as much as 30 percent. Trees are planted to provide wind breaks and slow down soil desiccation. And on and on, one good idea after another, all well known to conscientious small-scale farmers in many areas of the world who have paid attention to the output of such

organizations as the New Alchemy Institute,⁶ the Rodale Press,⁷ and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, all tailored to the specific local environment.

The Godino project began several years ago, an outgrowth of efforts to find local organizations that could sponsor such an effort. Family Services, an Ethiopian self-help organization, was deemed to be such an operation, and with the director of that enterprise as local director of the LAWRI effort the project started. First twenty-nine hectares of land were bought in an area centrally located to three small villages. While water was not immediately adjacent to the site, there was a spring about a mile away which could supply drinking water and ideally irrigation water. The plan was to set up the general outline of the project—a series of raised beds interspersed with fish ponds, along with a living compound—then cycle through three sets of volunteers for training. These would include both Americans and Soviets, along with indigenous farmers. The Soviets were included as a continuation of a previous LAWRI project; other Soviet assistance was also supplied, including trucks and other equipment.

This plan was carried out until the Ethiopian civil war required all expatriates to leave the country. However, in the time the project ran a great deal of progress was made. Each day the volunteers spent their time in outreach to local villagers. Every family had a garden, and the outreach program was intended to show them how they could increase their yields by using intensive farming techniques. In general, people did learn and yields improved. But old habits die slowly: it isn't known yet if the training took permanently.⁸

On the demonstration side, where large beds were created and crops were beginnings to come to full growth, the project was only one quarter of the way to completion. Few of the fish ponds were finished, and the fish handling system was not yet perfected. But the basic structure was in place. A collateral plan to plant hundreds of thousands of trees had begun, with the creation of large beds of seedlings. Trees are

6. See N. Wade, "New Alchemy Institute: Search for an Alternative Agriculture," *Science* 187 (1975): 727-29.

7. See, for example, J. I. Rodale, *Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening* (Emaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1973).

8. After a January 1992 trip to Godino to inspect the project, John McMillin reported that 80 percent of fruit trees were producing well (the remainder having been run over by people escaping from advancing troops); the double-dig beds were also producing heavily; the fish ponds were being used for storage and would have to be cleaned out; an important bridge built by the project had collapsed under the weight of a tank and has to be rebuilt. But there were no "white faces" on the project (a "visiting Mormon missionary from Kenya" worked hard there for a while but had left). And above all there was no sense of beholden-ness on the part of locals. This was their project.

an almost unheard of luxury in this and many other central and east African countries. They have virtually all been cut down or stripped of limbs for firewood. The vegetable beds and beds of fruit tree seedlings were also well along.

One of the exciting aspects of the LAWRI intensive agriculture-aquaculture approach is that it is easy to monitor its effectiveness. One test is to put the system up against the local farming techniques. In one such trial, a local farmer well-known for his quality results went head-to-head with a raised bed. The LAWRI approach out produced the local techniques, 1,900 kilograms of vegetable matter to under 1,000, with far less labor and even less water. And all of the waste vegetable matter that wasn't eaten by cows went back into the soil. That leads to the second way to monitor results: by measuring classical soil chemistry—pH, available minerals, organic content, and so forth. Most telling is soil tilth. With additional organic material, this soil which traditionally becomes brick-hard in the dry season and mud soup in the rainy season, becomes instead a manageable loam and nitrogen content soars.⁹

PRINCIPLES FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

So finally what are the principles on which Mormon church famine-relief and development projects might be based?

A. The projects should be designed as if no outside technological assistance were going to be available for any extended period. They should quickly become locally self-sufficient. In the LAWRI Godino project this principle was violated by using seeds from the United States which would soon become unavailable: in fact, they have already done so. But they are conscious of this and intend to produce their own seeds on site. Other techniques to be avoided are ones based on petroleum fuels, synthetic fertilizers, or pesticides and herbicides.

In a humorous aside, the traditional "intensive" gardening system involves "double digging" the plot. You dig out a trench one shovel-blade deep along one edge of your plot, setting aside the soil. You then dig the soil up one more blade-depth, leaving the now loosened-and-aerated soil in place. You then move a shovel-width down your garden, dig a second trench, placing that soil into the first trench, double-dig the second row, move to the third, and so on through the entire plot. You finally put the set-aside soil from the first trench into the last one. All the while you have

9. This information is based on LAWRI annual reports on the Godino Project, on conversations with John McMillin, and on extended conversations with Noel Benson, a volunteer/liason specialist on the Godino Project. McMillin can be reached at Land and Water Resources International, 19231 3336th Ave. W., Lynnwood, Washington, 98007 (206-743-3266).

been adding appropriate soil amendments (compost, manure, etc.) to the soil. This is the plan, and the LAWRI Godino project was prepared to do all this. They included a large number of fine shovels in the equipment brought for the project, forgetting that none of the local farmers wears shoes. It is virtually impossible to use a shovel to dig hard soil without strong boots. So the entire project had to be done with the crude mattock-like local equipment which makes it more difficult and less efficient.

B. Second, the projects should be capable of coming to fruition in relatively short time periods, at least in an introductory way. In other words, large-scale projects are out. This probably would include the million-dollar project in irrigation supported by the church's fast donations. The problem with large-scale, long time-frame projects is that they commonly are beyond the capabilities of locals to manage and control. They depend on outside help, either from urban areas of the country or abroad. And if a war comes along to interrupt them, they will languish and go to waste.

There are good examples of both of these problems in the Godino area. There in a shed, near the small plots made by the LAWRI project, are two large British combines meant by some prior project funders with a more traditional energy-and-technology-intensive approach to harvest local grain (a fairly low-productivity equivalent to wheat in our country). The combines have never been used. Not once. They couldn't be hooked up to the local tractors because of a mismatch in the hitches. Now the tractors can't even be used because there is no fuel. But the LAWRI project can go on, feeding people, producing food for them to sell to get currency, changing their lives, changing the local environment.

C. The projects should involve a "multiplier effect," primarily accomplished by teaching. They should not benefit only those directly involved. For example, in the Godino project much of the time for both Ethiopian and European staff was spent as "proto-ag-extension-agents" walking in nearby villages, chatting with locals about their gardens, sharing improved methods for accomplishing more, inviting them to see what was being done in the demonstration projects. And LAWRI is constantly searching for ways to fund an ambitious plan to set up training institutes on all five major continents to develop local management and training capabilities, to "get the US out of the loop," so to speak.

Anyone familiar with the history of these sorts of developments will recognize the principles as the core of "appropriate technology" and "small is beautiful."¹⁰ Putting those principles into practice will prevent

10. See J. Leckie, G. Master, H. Whitehouse, and L. Young, *Other Homes and Garbage: Designs for Self-Sufficient Living* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1975); E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

the church from being led astray; using them as guidelines will help those who choose what types of projects to support to be of greatest use to those they are trying to help. Back to the village banking example mentioned earlier. This \$20,000 project can change the lives of an entire village as the benefits of a stable local source of capital are felt. Attitudes change, the future opens up. The same applies if local agriculture can start producing a surplus without at the same time becoming a debt-producer, an energy-sink, or a source of poisonous chemicals.

One of the most exciting prospects for this urban-American Mormon church member is that these same principles apply in our own home wards and cities. Waste spaces can be made to produce food for the hungry. There is abundant land for such projects. People can contribute to their own well-being. When I was recently in Switzerland, I saw garden after garden in the tiniest spots: little openings between sidewalks adjacent to railroad tracks, for example, would have a dozen potato plants growing in them. We have space in our cities to use, if we only have the will to do it. Sadly, the church and its members seem to have abandoned one of our most wholesome traditions: local production projects. Ward and branch emphasis on food production at home is a vital part of self-sufficiency and preparedness. My hope is that we can return to this important bit of teaching and training.

We can teach the world's crowded peoples to feed themselves more effectively without turning the planet into a giant agri-business project. I believe it can be done. One of the most common condemnations of Mormons is that they ignore the ticking of the "population bomb" by encouraging large families. If we could show that if the world were well organized it could feed itself, we would do a great deal to enhance our acceptability among mainstream environmental thinkers, not to mention other religious groups. As it is, we appear irresponsible with our three-, four-, five-, or six-children families. Just think where we would be if we would "teach the people of the world correct principles, and they would feed themselves!"