

“TOGETHER IN SPIRIT... WITH BELIEVERS EVERYWHERE”

Philippians 2:1-11

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

In the most recent issue of *Presbyterians Today*, Bryce Wiebe talks about three programs supported by the Peace and Global Witness offering. The first is coordinated by Jaff Bamenjo in Cameroon. The Network for the Fight Against Hunger or RELUFA works in the poor, densely populated northern part of the country. They're working with communities to create structures that reduce hunger without also creating dependence. Grain banks, for example, provide a source of food year round and reduce the practice of price gauging when food becomes scarce. They've persisted despite the dangers of the civil war that has been happening since 2016.

We're familiar with the second program supported by today's offering: Malawi Matters, an HIV/AIDS education program that helps reduce the stigma attached to the virus. The knowledge they pass on largely through churches is reducing the spread of it and drawing those who have contracted it into treatment where they can learn to live with it instead of facing a certain death. For the last several years, we've enjoyed making and sending kits to help with their education projects, while we hear of new developments from their board president Phyllis Wezeman.

Rev. Lane Brubaker teaches Bible Study and leads worship for Hagar's Community Church housed in the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Tacoma Washington. Most prison ministries are run by conservative groups, but Brubaker offers a setting where the women can be honest and accepted as they are without being judged for their sexual orientation or gender identity. When asked by the inmates why her ministry is so inclusive, she says, "it's not just Hagar's Community Church, it's what my denomination thinks."

I'd encourage you to read the fuller account of these organizations in the September/October issue, but I don't mention them this morning just to get you to give generously. These three and others like them raise certain questions which I think are at least partially answered by our reading from Philippians. What motivates people like Jaff Bamenjo to persist in his work in the midst of threats to family and his own life? What inspires Phyllis to continue her efforts year after year for people who live half a world away? What made Rev. Brubaker willing to walk through five sets of locked gates to get to her congregation of marginalized women? What sends anyone into the mission field?

Paul took great joy in the congregation at Philippi because he found in them the qualities he lists in chapter 2. Encouragement in Christ, meaning to be given courage in the example of Jesus; consolation of love, to find comfort in the love of God; sharing in the spirit, to see in one another the same spirit that was in Christ Jesus; compassion and sympathy, to feel with and for the pain of another. These are qualities that draw us out of ourselves and connect us to others. The courage we gain from Christ reminds us that we are not alone. The reminder that we are loved strengthens us for the struggles ahead.

The companionship we have with each other by the grace of God's Spirit creates the bonds that make ministry more powerful. Compassion and sympathy draw us into relationships we wouldn't have considered otherwise.

These things not only generate the healthy communities of faith we experience right here, but they also bind us to believers everywhere. We see these qualities in the person and example of Jesus who, Paul tells us, "did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited." He didn't bank on his connections with God to gain an advantage over the rest of us. He shared our humanity in all aspects. With courage he faced his own death. With love he comforted those at the margins. He talked about a common spirit that could breathe new life into us, even as she sustained him. His compassion compelled him to share and feel the pain of others. In coming among us he put our interests ahead of his. Those who follow him do the same, and in doing so form a bond with believers everywhere.

In this congregation, we are aware of these bonds in Malawi, Cuba, Palestine, Mexico, and Ghana. We have in our history formed connections in New Orleans, Kentucky, and Pittsburgh. As a church, we have been committed to serving the needs of others above our own. Every time we do that we find renewed courage, enhanced love, a more blessed connection, and experience the reality of community with believers everywhere.

But what would happen if we thought about the needs of others more frequently? What might we accomplish for refugees from war and famine? How might a greater concern for others impact our views and activity around immigration? How might we respond to the current calls to address issues around racism? What could we do to help families educate their children amidst the restrictions of this pandemic?

Are there connections we can make with those being released from prison? What could we do to address the walls that stand in the way of their reintroduction into the community? They face housing and employment restrictions. Many are denied voting rights even though they have "paid their time." What if we, like Jesus, saw the interests of prisoners as important as our own?

As people of faith, we are tied to people around the globe. As people of faith, we look to the interests of those in Kalamazoo, in the state of Michigan, in this country, this hemisphere, across both oceans. Our faith makes common cause with all sorts of people everywhere, with richer and poorer, with friends and enemies. It is not an easy thing to look after the interests of others, but when we do so, we make the world a little smaller and our own world a little larger. When we do so we bestow the blessing of God on others. We make space for peace. We preach good news. We strengthen the bonds of love. We honor our connections with believers everywhere. Amen.

Resources:

"Peace and Global Witness Offering: Sharing the Peace of Christ with the World" Bryce Wiebe in *Presbyterians Today* Volume 110, Issue 5 (September/October 2020), pp. 34-38.