

“Pragmatists’ Progress”

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STICK-THIN children covered in flies, living alongside bloated rats in shanties built on top of a rubbish heap. That’s a memory which brings tears to the eyes of Jann MacCollam as she described the conditions she witnessed at a city called Naga in the Philippines. She admitted that at first she was so disgusted with the squalor and overpowering stench, she could not bear to approach the children.

But after a few hours, she overcame her revulsion and worked alongside the nuns who every day bring some food and hope to the families eking out an existence around the dump.

Jann and her husband, Joel MacCollam, from the United States, are partners with a global mission: to provide practical help to some of the poorest and most desperate people in the world. They’re in Hong Kong to raise money for their charity, World Emergency Relief (WER).

The charity approaches companies to request donations of clothes, medicine and foods that can be sent to people in need. Supermarket chains, for example, often have to off-load foodstuffs that have reached their “best-used-by” (as opposed to the expiry) date. But many of these items are still in good condition and safe for consumption. The MacCollams try to ensure they end up on someone’s table instead of in a landfill.

That could be the table of an orphaned child in Thailand or Russia, or an impoverished family in Africa.

Similarly, medical supplies nearing their expiry date can still

be put to use, provided speedy action is taken. Last year, a Canadian pharmaceutical company donated five million tetanus shots to WER for use in the Philippines that had a remaining shelf-life of four months. These were distributed and used within that time-frame. Normally, they would have simply been thrown away. It’s opportunities like these the charity likes to exploit – turning potential waste into life-saving projects. In the past year, WER shipped more than US\$40 million (HK\$312 million) worth of goods to the needy.

Rev. MacCollam, president of the charity, is an Anglican minister who in 1985 traded his pastoral duties for direct action in the fight against disease and poverty. He admits that after nine years of serving his community in California and New York, he became disenchanted with some aspects of the Episcopal Church, which he described as becoming too embroiled in divisive liturgical issues.

“The Episcopal Church still tries desperately to be politically correct,” he said. “I found myself a theological conservative in a political atmosphere: I wasn’t doing what I wanted to do – to be a doctor of souls. It was more like being a country club manager, or a political campaign coordinator helping to stir up congregations on certain issues.”

Nowadays, he’s almost permanently on the road fund-raising for projects throughout the world.

The aim is always to work with the local population to find solutions. Sometimes requests from

community leaders are turned down. One group of businessmen in the Philippines asked the charity to build a school so that the children in the town wouldn’t have to go to Manila to find work. But when Mr. MacCollam asked them what they, as employers, intended to provide in the way of jobs, they were not interested. Without a long-term strategy and commitment, it was thought premature to go ahead.

Asked if the charity had ever seen any of its donations fall into the wrong hands, Rev. MacCollam was pragmatic. It did happen, he said, but the amount “lost” was miniscule compared to that safely delivered. He estimated that about 1 percent of donations went astray, adding, “It would not be cost-effective to chase down the problems where they exist.”

But there are countries the charity avoids. One is North Korea, which has suffered a devastating famine. Rev. MacCollam cited reports of misappropriation of donated items.

“There’s pressure on me to send food to North Korea, but I won’t do it,” he said, “because American officials have said they’ve seen food coming in from the US and other donor countries, destined for people dying in the famine, being taken off in military trucks to army bases.”

As a US citizen, he felt the charity could not operate under those circumstances. “I can’t support feeding North Korean soldiers who may invade the South sometime and start shooting American troops,” he said.

WER has been operating in the former Eastern bloc countries and Russia for several years. It has been very active in a town called Curtea-de-Arges, north of Bucharest, Romania. It has helped to upgrade the hospital and funded over 130 small-business efforts, creating 2,160 new jobs in a community of 25,000.

The charity has also built greenhouses and trained farmers how to manage three growing seasons instead of two.

WER also distributed over 40,000 aid packages to refugee families in war-torn Kosovo and Albania. The charity is now assisting them in the struggle to survive outside their destroyed homes this winter.

Rev. MacCollam has some harsh words for people who use charities to off-load useless products. He gave an example of a Japanese company that sent 106 containers of medical equipment to the Philippines. The cargo was eagerly awaited by hospitals and clinics. Disappointment quickly set in when the shipment arrived.

“Somebody had basically cleaned out a dump and put it in containers,” he said.

Ensuring quality is a priority for WER. There is a well-established grapevine, and rogue operators are quickly blacklisted. “If you say something is dated February 2002 and it’s actually dated February 2000, you’ll never hear from us again,” he added.

Companies, he said, benefit from tax breaks and on the public relations front by their involvement with the charity.

Later this year, WER will be looking for volunteers from Hong Kong to help with projects around the world. The charity is extending its operations into the Pacific Rim area. Rev. MacCollam is

currently assessing where to set up the office – Hong Kong is a possibility, with Manila and Bangkok also under consideration.

He feels that Hong Kong, while expensive, has accounting systems he can relate to, and ease of communication. The charity has formed links with seven major shipping companies based in Manila for transport of donations. Here in Hong Kong, he has noted the potential of the vast container terminal.

“As I passed it, I couldn’t help but think that if we could just have one container a month out of all those thousands, it would mean a lot,” he said.

One of his key missions is to change a deep-set pattern in charitable giving. He wants Third World or underdeveloped countries to give to each other rather than just relying on developed nations.

“I want the poor to help the poor,” he said. For example, in disaster relief, he felt that volunteers from within the afflicted country or neighboring countries could play a bigger part in restoration.

WER tries to keep its operating costs at a minimum in order to channel donations into programs. Fund-raising and administrative expenses account for just 2 percent of its overall expenditure. Fund-raising is done mostly by direct mail. There is a staff of nine in the US and four in Britain.

But to avoid EU regulations, much of the work in Europe is passed on to agencies on a project-by-project basis. “Today in Holland, if I hire a person, after two months I can’t fire them – it’s a job for life,” Rev. MacCollam explained.

These EU regulations do not sit well with him. “In our operation, we can’t afford to have sluggards

on the team that we have to carry, no matter what,” he said.

He and his wife have a different set of priorities. Just returned from visiting an orphanage in Thailand, Jann is now focused on getting provisions for its infant wing. “They’re going to need cribs, diapers, milk powder,” she said.

For Rev. MacCollam, the chance to help children grow up to be well-adjusted adults, free from the traps of destitution, is the greatest reward.

Some people, he said, like to leave memorials in their name, but for him, helping future generations is enough.