

Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization

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This article is a reflection and a call to action for many readers who may share a concern about how to reduce human suffering and empower the poor around the world. It is an attempt to describe stories of Latter-day Saints who became social entrepreneurs by laboring to practice our religion—that is, people willing to help the poor, feed the hungry, serve the homeless, and bless the sick everywhere. Attending sacrament meetings on Sundays, accepting a Church calling, doing weekly temple service, being a neighborhood ministering brother or sister, holding daily prayer and scripture reading—all are well and good. Yet such practices are simply the *beginning* of truly living the gospel.

This year has been especially poignant because of the untimely death of our forty-two-year-old son Ryan last summer in 2022. Yet in the months since that tragic day, I’ve also seen a great deal of death, disease, and suffering in others’ lives as I labor among the global poor. So far, my friends and the nonprofit leaders I work with around the world now total 156 who have died from COVID-19 and related causes. Many were colleagues I hired to lead village development organizations for reducing human suffering. Of course, when these tragedies come to your own family, they become more painful than perhaps otherwise, but my colleagues were just like family to my wife, Kaye, and me.

As the two of us have reflected on and evaluated our personal sorrow and the loss of Ryan our triplet son, I’ve thought of so many others experiencing death or severe illness, both locally and globally. Many who struggle, like our friends in Ukraine, experience devastation, invasion, and war. Millions of others are now homeless, including many in Turkey and Syria,

where a series of earthquakes killed more than 59,000 and destroyed thousands of homes and buildings. Many suffer in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, places where we have labored over several decades, as people there try to cope with droughts, hunger, hurricanes, earthquakes, civil conflicts, floods, and more. Comparatively, our lives are pretty comfortable.

As a young person, I was startled to read a tremendous decree by the Prophet Joseph: “A man 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.”¹ This clarion call has been my life’s mission ever since I felt this cry from my beloved prophet to reach out with a global perspective to others, not just those I’m closest to or most comfortable being around. Together with friends, my wife, my family members, hundreds of my former students and volunteers, and thousands of others, we have labored to change the world as we have learned and worked around the globe for over four decades. At times, I have rallied my BYU students as well as students from other schools where I have served as a visiting professor, including in Brazil, Switzerland, California, and Hawaii and at the University of Utah, Harvard, Stanford, and my alma mater where I earned my PhD, the University of Michigan.

I believe our collaboration is an exciting testimony of how believers in Christ can uplift the poor and improve society today. We can each become a blessing to others. Our approach is not what the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may officially do. President Gordon B. Hinckley referred to this when he voiced his concern that we not depend solely on large organizations or institutional service, even on the Church: “We must take care of [the poor] and we must have the facilities to do so. But we must be careful not to overinstitutionalize that care. . . . I think there is a tendency among us to say, ‘Oh, the Church will take care of that. I pay my fast offering. Let the Church take care of that.’ We need as individuals, I think, to reach down and extend a helping hand without notice, . . . to give of that with which the Lord has so generously blessed us.”² So, he advocated that we also engage in noninstitutionalized acts of service to the poor.

1. “History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 1115, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 14, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/287>.

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 459.

I am not writing about the things that government programs, the World Bank, the United Nations, big business, and others can accomplish. Instead, I want to focus on what Jesus taught—that we, like him, should go “about doing good” (Acts 10:38). In this dialogue on practical Christianity, I will share examples of just a few associates with whom I’ve been blessed to serve, including some who later established their own private humanitarian initiatives. They reached out with both faith and action to make a long-term, sustainable difference. So far, as of 2023, my associates and I have designed and implemented some forty-one NGOs (nongovernmental organizations, or nonprofits). We currently have fifty-four paid staff working in sixty-two nations, as well as others in the United States.

In some instances, my associates felt motivated when they saw people’s suffering and felt determined to lessen the pain of those across the planet. Sometimes their efforts were unappreciated and unnoticed. But they continued to make quiet commitments to carry out humanitarian efforts, often in far-flung corners of the world, whether or not they received recognition.

Individual Cases of Work That Became NGOs

For instance, Sarah Carmichael Parsons, a neuroscience graduate student from Canada, helped me organize an NGO named Wave of Hope (2016) after an earthquake and a tsunami struck eleven countries around the Indian Ocean at Christmas in 2004. Instead of a “wave of destruction,” we decided to offer “hope” after 250,000 victims died and millions were injured in the region. I mobilized students in my class at BYU’s Marriott School of Management and formed teams to go assist those suffering in the coastal villages of Thailand. Sarah became the team leader of the project for the tough and complex work of jump-starting the Thai village economy and rebuilding destroyed communities. She had both the spirit and the leadership skills to help mobilize college volunteers who possessed the moral energy and new skills to make an impact. We couldn’t do everything, but we felt we could each do *something*. Because more than 11,000 Thais had died and many coastal communities were devastated, we began a decade of work to ensure long-term sustainable results. Our efforts included rebuilding homes; recovering the thousand-year-old fishing economy with new boats, motors, and tackle; cleaning and painting wrecked schools for hundreds of children; serving newly widowed mothers and the many new orphans whose parents

had both died; teaching the people how to make rudimentary furniture for their new houses; and much more. Sarah gave her heart to lead this project for the next few years, even while her fiancé, Chris, was fighting for America against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan to help those countries.

In our early labors, some experts with whom we consulted considered us a kind of “Students without Borders” project growing out of my BYU course on organizational behavior, which was called “Becoming a Global Change Agent/Social Entrepreneur.” Additionally, I recruited a few older professional volunteers, including Utah bankers, consultants from Texas, former Thai missionaries, and others. After a decade, the Khao Lak region along Thailand’s coast was largely rebuilt, and we merged the organization with other NGOs I had founded. Sarah served on their boards and eventually launched her own charity with her husband, Chris, and their growing family. Taking a cue from Wave of Hope, she named it Dolls of Hope (2023). So far, they have engaged thousands of Latter-day Saint women to produce handmade soft, cuddly dolls and teddy bears totaling over sixty thousand and have given them to kids in refugee camps in more than forty countries. To this day, Sarah continues her service to those who struggle.

As I see it, we believers in the scriptures and teachings of our latter-day prophets and apostles can each become global ministers by providing humanitarian service in three principal ways. First are the *traditional Church programs*, such as paying tithes, making personal offerings, or going abroad as a group or even serving as international missionaries in a needy African country, for example. A second area of outreach and humanitarian assistance can be provided through *partnering with other institutions*. These may consist of Church programs like Latter-day Saint Charities, the Perpetual Education Fund, or regular Church welfare and self-reliance services. Friends from other faiths may also benefit from our work because the Church also collaborates with other religious groups like the Adventists’ ADRA, Catholic Relief, and the Muslim Relief Society. Such partnerships and a variety of outreach efforts enable us to bless our neighbors in need as global ministers. A third category, the one I will primarily describe in this essay, involves each of us taking independent action by *engaging in individual acts of consecration and stewardship*.

These are what we might refer to as personal initiatives—not the Church’s established programs as an organization but rather actions

inspired by experiences as we pray about how we might help those around us or when we see on the nightly news the devastation impacting a community, region, or country. Even our own neighbors right next door and others who may suffer and struggle in our community deserve our financial support, illustrated by the past winter months of horrific destruction and death from hurricanes in the South, massive snowstorms hitting much of the country, and other natural disasters that have recently torn up regions of the United States: the horrific winters in upstate New York, the wildfires in California, the droughts in the Navajo Nation. I believe it is crucially important that we engage in these kinds of activities *locally*, not merely *globally*, because those struggling in difficult circumstances around us typically affect our own lives, and thus we can affect *their lives* much more easily, more rapidly, and with fewer costs than we can affect people globally. However, in this essay I will specifically emphasize international humanitarian initiatives.

Living a Practical Christianity

I believe that serving and empowering the global poor enables us to provide individual acts of consecration and stewardship—the kind that show we can go beyond simply depending on large organizations, as President Hinckley admonished us—and take the initiative to engage in noninstitutionalized acts of service to others.

Such faithful Christian disciples have characteristics such as being self-starters who recognize others’ needs and act to meet those needs. They believe in not waiting to be “command[ed] in all things” (D&C 58:26). Instead, such people take action when they see a problem. They are authentic individuals. They are true to themselves. They are not motivated by external rewards or pressure or recognition. Rather, their high-impact service comes from pure and authentic motives, as the scriptures command.

For example, Mentors International was founded in 1990 when I responded to the pleas of the Filipino Saints in Manila and mobilized a group of Latter-day Saint business executives, a few of my BYU students, and several Filipino Latter-day Saints and evangelical Christians in the island nation. When Mentors was being designed in Manila with a team of U.S. and Filipino founders, its mission was “to build self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit within those who struggle for

sufficiency in developing countries.”³ Working first in the Philippines and now having expanded to seventeen countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Mentors works with hired indigenous staff, building increased self-reliance among the recipients of its aid. Efforts are made to charge for consulting services based on ability to pay, which transforms the typical donor-receiver dependency relationship into a more effective, character-building consultant-client relationship. Early on, we hired in Manila Tony San Gabriel, a returned missionary with a management degree, as Mentors executive director. He worked with us as we established the project, and then as we expanded our work, he managed it as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. Its primary interventions included training, consulting, walk-in services, professional referrals, and access to microcredit loans. Still today, Mentors depends on individual, foundation, and corporate donations to achieve its goals. As of early 2023, it had raised more than \$176 million to train people and provide them with loans.⁴ Those efforts, in turn, have established more than one million new jobs, thus benefiting some five million poor people in the developing world.⁵ Several years ago, the Church’s First Presidency honored our NGO as an example of initiative-taking service to the global poor. While we appreciated their kindness, we neither sought nor needed such a reward.

An additional case of doing good is that of a recent acquaintance I met while serving to rebuild communities high in the Himalayan mountains after devastating earthquakes. Her name is Ellen Dietrich, an LDS convert from Germany. Several decades ago, she launched a small humanitarian organization, Self Help Nepal (now called Home of Hope), to help Nepalese orphans. But her efforts accelerated after the severe earthquakes in 2015 when her little nonprofit was able to provide emergency aid such as food and tents for some of the earthquake victims.⁶ Although she had begun her life’s work earlier with a small

3. Warner Woodworth and others, *Small Really Is Beautiful: Micro Approaches to Third World Development—Microentrepreneurship, Microenterprise, and Microfinance* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Third World Thinktank, 1997), 100.

4. Estimate compiled from annual board reports in possession of the author.

5. Data compiled from sources such as Mentors International 2021 and 2022 online “Impact Reports,” plus “Founded on the Principle of Providing a Hand Up,” <https://mentorsinternational.org/our-beginning/>.

6. Warner Woodworth, personal interview with Ellen Dietrich, founder of Homes for Hope, in Kathmandu, Nepal, December 18, 2015.

school for impoverished children, her efforts grew, and Ellen has now officially graduated some 150 children in Kathmandu. She successfully draws on university students and trainees, both Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths, Germans as well as Americans. They teach the children and foster other projects, such as organizing free-time activities in which the volunteers use their own interests and talents to teach the children pursuits such as sports, singing, dancing, theater performances, and drawing. Since Nepal is a nation of many cultures, volunteers also plan celebrations for Hindu, Buddhist, and Tibetan holidays with the children.

Ellen began by saving her own money, later securing additional funds from German associates, and established the Home of Hope, operating two houses. One is the “old house,” home to children ages eight and older, while the younger children have lived and studied in the “new house” since 2016. The children live in family-like structures in both houses and are taken care of by a Nepalese family, additional employees, and volunteers. The children are subsidized until they complete their education and may then be funded to go on to vocational training or academic study to build a better future of their own. Ellen’s personal, independent ministry to serve “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40) is a wonderful example of what other Latter-day Saints might accomplish in blessing others.

Over my years of working, teaching, and consulting in my chosen vineyard with the poor, I have met many faithful Latter-day Saint humanitarians who have developed what I refer to as *social entrepreneurial acumen*—the capacity to see problems and then take action. Many draw on business and other training to establish nonprofit start-ups of their own NGOs. As I have been privileged to be a part of growing that movement, I see a powerful trend that, in some ways, I would argue is far more important and may ultimately give us better recognition as Church members than would the typical for-profit business start-up or other means of wealth generation.

Instead, I think what we are seeing now is the flourishing of the means for building civil society rather than for-profit businesses. These include private nongovernmental organizations as well as third-sector institutions that have an enormous impact in benefiting the lives of the poor around the globe. Many such humanitarians have launched initiatives in the past several decades, acting as “social entrepreneurial” Christians who draw on their faith, rely on scriptural values, harness

their educations, and call forth their business skills in designing and launching effective humanitarian services strategies. We see in the preceding illustrations of Sarah Carmichael Parsons, Tony San Gabriel, and Ellen Dietrich various efforts grown by Latter-day Saints within the United States, outside the U.S., and across the world in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. They are Church members who start their own similar programs, draw on that same faith, and, as a result, achieve significant impacts for good.

The Church members with whom I have collaborated have primarily been BYU students, BYU alumni, and some alumni from other schools. So far, the total number of young people joining forces with us to change the world comprises some 4,200 volunteers. My colleagues and I have also reached out for volunteers beyond academia, such as homemakers, retirees, engineers, artists, businesspeople, schoolteachers, accountants, musicians, and lawyers. Our collective fundraising exceeds \$1.5 billion! Yes, that's with a "B." In all our work, we try to use Latter-day Saint principles defining "charity"—the very term that comes from old words for "Christian love"—to elevate the poor in such a way that they may help themselves and, in turn, help others. We labor using this notion of a beneficial ripple effect. It's not a handout but a hand up. It's not building dependency or simply giving out things and goods. And it's not a form of creating a culture of wanting more and living passively while charity and relief simply continue to flow to the recipients. Rather, the LDS ministering that my friends and I seek consists of helping people learn principles and develop systems so that the poor may empower *themselves* and then reach out and empower others toward self-reliance.

Why are such Latter-day Saint humanitarians needed today? Because the reality is that a great many people on the face of this earth are suffering. According to the World Bank, 719 million people, 10 percent of the world's population, live on less than \$2.15 a day.⁷ According to Brigham Young, this is wrong: "We will take a moral view, a political view, and we see the inequality that exists in the human family. . . . It is an unequal condition of mankind. . . . What is going to be done? The Latter-day Saints will never accomplish their mission until this inequality shall cease on the earth."⁸

7. "Measuring Poverty," World Bank, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/measuringpoverty>.

8. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 19:46 (May 27, 1877).

It is clear to me and other experts that critical needs are not being met by enormous systems or large institutions, whether they be governments, the United Nations, or the International Red Cross. And the reality is that, even if we gave away all the money we have as a church, or as a country, it still wouldn’t solve the problems of the global poor. More about these problems and private Church-member initiatives can be found in my recent book on LDS humanitarian efforts, *Radiant Mormonism*.⁹ The challenge is to learn how we can be “practicing Christians” by using capital—whether financial, human, or organizational—to build a better world and address these terrible problems that the worldwide poor face and, by doing so, help the people lift themselves up.

Conclusions

In this essay, I’m advocating that we believers in Christ organize our humanitarian efforts into what I’m calling “Latter-day Saints without Borders.” It will become an association of our Church members’ humanitarian organizations that collaborate and learn from each other. But it will not become just another monolithic organization operating as one. Rather, it will become a network for learning innovations and best practices from each other while remaining independent and more innovative than a bureaucracy. When I began proposing this concept in the 1980s, I felt the time was not right and our efforts were too young. Now the day has finally come to make a more significant difference in the world. I believe these mini-cases offer glimpses of the many ways that we can utilize our God-given talents to carry out what the Church teaches. We can mobilize our efforts, not in one big bureaucratic institution with mountains of red tape and rigid policies but rather in bottom-up, grass-roots global initiatives.

In 1985, we established the first two NGOs in Utah: the Ouelesse-bougou Alliance and CHOICE Humanitarian. Acquaintances predicted neither would succeed. They warned that these nonprofits would lack money and volunteers and would disintegrate within a couple of years. Such predictions were dramatically wrong. Each has lasted thirty-eight years and is now stronger than ever, having raised many millions of dollars and produced amazing socioeconomic impacts for thousands of villages in a dozen nations.

9. Warner Woodworth, *Radiant Mormonism: Using Our Faith in Christ to Power World-Changing Service* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2022).

Since that humble beginning, Church members have founded and developed some 267 other global NGOs that serve those who struggle in over a hundred countries. The time is now to collaborate further, to exchange and learn from each one's best practices, and to partner with Latter-day Saint innovators throughout the world so that together we can truly generate great blessings to the entire human race. Long live Latter-day Saints without Borders!

Warner Woodworth's life has been one of working to reduce poverty in a hundred countries. With collaborators, he has helped established forty-one NGOs (nongovernment organizations) that currently operate in sixty-two nations. Married and blessed with ten children, he has served in multiple bishoprics, in a mission presidency, and on several high councils. Formerly, he was an institute director, a full-time seminary teacher, and a professor at multiple colleges, primarily at the Marriott School of Business, Brigham Young University. He has published twelve books and more than three hundred articles, and he has presented his research at nearly a thousand academic conferences. But those were his "day jobs." This paper draws on his life as a Latter-day Saint global-change agent, as well as a practicing academic. Now in his eighty-second year—after teaching at BYU and other universities such as Rio de Janeiro, the University of Michigan, and Claremont in southern California—he is accelerating his writing to bear witness of Christ and advocate for the poor. Seeking to engage others in applying their abilities to serve the world's "have-nots" is his lifelong mission.