

Can “Stuff” Save the Children?

Some questions about projects that send boxes to children overseas.

by Deborah Marshall

The Division of World Outreach has received many questions recently about international programs which invite people in congregations to fill boxes or pails with gifts for children, especially at Christmas time. Such projects have great appeal to people who are concerned about helping those in need, especially children who are at risk because of poverty, war, or emergency situations. People in Canada want to brighten the lives of such children and let them know that someone cares. People in Canada are often attracted to a hands-on project which is easy and fun to do – and which they hope will also make a difference for children somewhere else.

If you are contemplating participating in such a project, we suggest you consider some questions to help you decide if this is the best way to make a long-lasting difference for children in need.

Questions to Consider

- What is the purpose of the project? Does it invite study to understand the global context in which the children live?
- Does the project address the root causes of the suffering or need? If it doesn't, then it may bring momentary delight to the recipient but probably won't make a long-lasting difference. It won't change the situations that cause suffering.
- Are the contents appropriate to our United Church respect for people of other faiths or do they try to convert to the Christian faith?
- How are the children involved in the process? Are they more than receivers? Are children asked what they need in order to make a difference in their lives? Is there respect for the ingenuity and power of children to make a difference in their own lives?
- Who decides which children get a box and which children don't? What criteria are used?
- Do the gifts contribute to the health of the child?
- Are the gifts culturally appropriate? Do they export our western values of consumerism?

There are alternatives.

The traditional response from the United Church of Canada is that a better way to address the needs of the world is to raise and give money to the Mission & Service Fund. Grants from the M&S Fund are sent to overseas partners, who distribute it according to the needs the partners themselves identify. Then the power is with the local partners who know the immediate situation. They partners usually are also working to address the long-term

needs of people and to bring social, economic, and political changes that will eventually reduce the need for aid from outside. In relation to children, many global partners have effective programs to address such issues as child poverty; child labour; AIDs awareness, prevention and care; food and nutrition; and children's rights. All these programs can well use more financial contributions sent from the Mission & Service Fund.

Special Awareness-Raising and Fund-Raising Program Aimed at Children

Many United Church people want a closer connection, a more vivid picture of the programs they support. In addition to the "16 Global Mission Ideas" (page __), we are offering opportunities for responding to the needs of children around the world through a special educational focus, "Children: Is anybody listening? We are!" This special awareness-raising and fund-raising program will build on this mission study and will provide some additional resource materials that bring to life our global partners' programs for children.

Watch for more information in the August Infopac. Included will be four "story cards" with information about global programs for children and action ideas for United Church congregations. The cards could be used for the four Sundays in lent or for monthly sessions during the fall. Congregations will be asked to create a "group Christmas greeting, small banner or letter" to be dedicated in the congregation and sent through DWO to a congregation of a global partner.

If a congregation wishes, in addition, to make a special financial contribution to the work of global partners with children, a donation can be sent to the M & S Fund. Unless we increase giving to M & S, some of the valuable programs we already support will be cut.

We encourage members of United Church congregations to use these materials in the months leading up to Christmas 2001—and after—and in this way to contribute to programs of global partners that have a long-term impact on saving the lives of children. For more information, contact Deborah Marshall, The United Church of Canada, Division of World Outreach, 3250 Bloor St. W., Ste. 300, Etobicoke, ON M8X 2Y4, 416-231-7680, ext. 5166;