

January 4, 2005

Ottawa Watch 7: Those pesky little blow-ins

By Lloyd Mackey

I wrote this piece shortly after retiring from active Christian newspaper development activity, while still working out of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery. The “blow-in” theme helped explain the relationship between the Christian community and the relief and development activities it triggered globally, often with the help of the federal government.

Have you ever complained appreciatively about fluttery little leaflet falling out of your favorite Christian newspaper.

The leaflet often features a photo of a youngster who looks to be in need of a friend, a little nourishment and a bit of hope.

One version of the leaflet has an eye-catching headline: “Dear God ...”

Now that I am retired from active Christian newspaper management, I can talk freely about those pesky little leaflets, without being in conflict of interest.

In newspapering, we refer to them as “blow-ins” because, sometimes, machines “blow” the leaflets into the newspapers. And, just at the right time, when you pick up your paper after church, “Dear God ...” falls out and onto the floor.

Some ministers complain about the fallout rate, because, if the newspaper reader does not pick up the fallen blow-in, somebody else has to later.

More often than not, however, the blow-in does its job. It captures the attention of the reader. Then it begins or continues the work of development education in a Christian context.

Many Christian relief and development agencies use these blow-ins extensively, to involve Christian pew-warmers in the never-ending task of bringing hope in less-developed villages and cities within what is sometimes called the “10-40 window”. That window represents the land surfaces around the globe between the 10th and 40th latitudes where most of the lesser-developed areas exist.

The blow-ins are quiet little workers. They complement the television specials, weekend education activities, Christian concert intermission features and a whole range of other ways that Christian relief and development agencies use to raise awareness for what they are doing in the 10-40 window.

Always, the message to the reader, viewer and listener is “you can do something to help.” A request for a monthly pledge of an amount roughly akin to two cups of coffee a day, is usually a part of the presentation.

Several years ago, I attended a fund-raising workshop led by some people who were responsible for booking the newspaper blow-in schedule for one particular agency. When the time came for questions or comments, I identified myself as the editor of a Christian newspaper and noted that our paper often carried the “Dear God ...” blow-in.

The workshop leader was seemingly delighted to talk about how those blow-ins had raised millions of dollars over the years, for their particular agency.

For us, at that newspaper, the “blow-in” revenue was always appreciated. Indeed, many Christian newspapers could not have survived for long without it.

But we were also aware that the cost of the distributing the leaflets, over time, was just a tiny percentage of the revenue raised as a result. When all is said and done, sponsorship scandal notwithstanding, advertising, well and wisely-placed, pays.

All this came back to me the last few days, as I observed vast amounts of money being raised for tsunami relief, by relief and development agencies, many of them Christian.

I touched on this in last week’s *OttawaWatch* and named several Christian agencies that had been on the cutting edge of tsunami relief work.

The particular agency that has used the blow-ins most consistently and often is World Vision. (Many readers will have guessed that already, because they send that \$30 a month or so to WV – and possibly started to do so because they read a “Dear God ...” leaflet.)

World Vision is just one of the agencies that have, among them, raised some \$80 million so far, for tsunami relief. And that \$80 million, for the most part, will be matched by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA, whose minister responsible is Aileen Carroll).

From the beginning of the tsunami crisis, the non-government organizations (NGOs) involved in development and relief provided the initiative. There has been a fair amount of public complaint about the apparent sluggishness of the Canadian government, in responding to the crisis.

The complainers should not be surprised however, by either the initiative of the NGOs or the follow up role of government.

And the blow-ins are part of the explanation. When World Vision – and World Relief, Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Children’s Fund, Samaritan’s Purse or any other reputable Christian agency – started their work, they were motivated in part by a particular crisis requiring relief work. And they had to appeal to their Christian

communities to help financially in relieving the effects of such things as famine, flood and earthquake.

As development – the ongoing work of bringing health care, education, good water, agricultural viability and economic tools to 10-40 communities who needed it – became the focus, the agencies retooled to let their supporters know that development was the continuing outcome of relief.

So, when the shift went back to relief, for the time being, on December 26, to deal with the tsunami crisis, the agencies were ready. At one end, they had people on the ground to provide fast needs assessments and, at the other, people ready to give the needed money.

And the government was there to top it up through CIDA.

Some readers will recognize a lot of the above as basic Economics 101, with its inherent description of the relationship between the household, the firm, the financial institutions, the government and other nations.

There is another element present, though, with respect to the Christian agencies. It is the considerable motivation that the Christian faith creates, in dealing with these matters. Some of it comes out of what has turned so many Christians into internationalists over the past 100 years or so – the drive of Christian mission and outreach.

Perhaps it is worth remembering, next time one of those blow-ins flutters out of a Christian newspaper. If you have never done it before, pick it up and read it. Your life could change and a few others along with it.

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